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THE SOLITARY HOUSE



THE BORZOI
MYSTERY STORIES

I THE WHITE ROOK

By J. B. Harris-Burland

II THE SOLITARY HOUSE

By E. R. Punshon

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THE SOLITARY HOUSE

BY
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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Keith Norton on the Road

It made a pretty picture, as he, limping down the long road, came upon it suddenly at a turn in the path he was following; and since even a tramp may admire a view if he will, just as a cat may look at a king, Keith Norton paused for a moment to look and to admire.

He was tired, too, and glad to rest for a moment, for he had walked five-and-twenty miles that day, and the ache in his weary limbs reminded him of the times when he had believed every tramp to be a lazy vagabond anxious only to escape work.

The house that made the centre of the landscape he had paused to admire was not a large one, but it was picturesquely situated on the slope of the hill against the large dark masses of surrounding woods that were now in the full glory of their summer foliage. Above it was the crest of the hill, and at a little distance a small stream ran for a space from the spring in the open where it rose to lose itself in the recesses of the wood as though

suddenly afraid and seeking shelter there. The house faced due west, so that, as now the day was drawing to its close, the full rays of the declining sun shone upon it, showing every detail clearly and making its windows shine as though they were of molten gold.

Perhaps to some degree the appeal that it made to the solitary watcher by the wayside lay in the fact that it was the first sign of human habitation he had seen for some hours, and after the bareness of the close-cropped inhospitable downs, barren and void of all save an occasional flock of sheep, this little house nestling in the trees on the green hill-side had for him a very attractive air.

"Pretty little place," he said presently and moved on, for it was late and he was seeking shelter, and he noticed that he had not gone many yards when the cottage on the hill-side vanished entirely from his sight.

The effect was a little startling. One moment it was there in full view, the next it had vanished as though, like the little brook, it had fled into the woods for shelter. Though Keith was in no mood to interest himself in trifles, or to take an unnecessary step out of his way, he turned back to see how it was this happened, and was aware indeed of an odd feeling of doubt and hesitation that made him anxious to assure himself the house was really there

and actually existent. For when one has had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours and not much for two or three days previously, one's eyes and brain are apt to play queer tricks.

But the house was still there, plain and solid on the hill-side, and the effect of sudden disappearance was caused merely by a bend in the road that chanced to correspond with a sweep forward of the line of trees upon the hill. But now his attention was drawn to it Keith noticed that much the same thing occurred as one came down the road the other way, which was why the house had the effect of appearing with such dramatic suddenness. In fact, it was visible only at one point upon the road, and now as Keith watched the pretty little house solitary upon the hill-side it seemed to him to take on an aspect secret and aloof, as though it had deliberately chosen that site in order to be well hidden from prying eyes.

"Bit odd," Keith thought to himself and resumed his tramp's steady, slouching pace that he knew must bear him a good many miles farther before there would be much chance of getting food or shelter.

It has to be confessed that it was entirely his own fault that Keith Norton, at the age of three-and-twenty, good looking, with bright brown eyes and brown hair with a curl to it many a girl might have

envied, gifted with good health, first-class muscles, and a brain of fully average quality, was at this moment a ragged tramp, hungry and homeless. The death of his father without means had closed the University to him in his second year, so that he had to leave without taking his degree, and friends had obtained for him quite a good position in a well-known, highly respected, and old-established house of business where he had only to be punctual in attendance, cultivate a neat handwriting, and make no mistakes in adding up, to be sure of a fair salary all his life, and with even before him the prospect of rising in due course of seniority to be head of his room and sit apart in a glass-enclosed compartment, a little like a fat goldfish in an aquarium.

But unfortunately Keith Norton was not so punctual as he should have been, his handwriting was deplorable—he had learnt both it and his spelling at one of our historic public schools, so no more need be said on that score—and to add up figures correctly bored him to distraction. The end came when one fine spring morning he went for a walk in the country, totally forgetting that such places as dingy old offices in the city even existed. Naturally his connection with one dingy old office ceased abruptly, and after a somewhat solemn week-end spent in considering the position,

Keith decided he would go to one of the colonies, working his way as a sailor since he had no money to pay his fare.

But there seemed no unduly keen competition for his services at the docks when he went to visit them; though at last one skipper, who was in a hurry and could not afford to be particular, shipped him as a deck hand. Keith, on the strength of a little yachting he had done, had considered himself something of a sailor man, but his experiences on this voyage entirely cured him of his illusions on the point; and as, moreover, the ship was only a tramp steamer making a coasting trip, his desire to reach the colonies was not much facilitated. A breakdown, total and complete, of the boat's engines, brought the trip to a summary end in a small west-country port, and Keith found himself discharged with twelve and sixpence as pay for about six weeks as hard work as man could wish for. To his somewhat vehement protests the skipper replied by explaining in hurt tones that the cap, woollen scarf, and one or two other small articles he had been supplied with had absorbed the rest of his earnings, and did he expect his outfit for nothing?

Keith did not consider the explanation satisfactory, or a cap and woollen scarf properly described as an outfit, and the argument that ensued devel-

oped into a fistic encounter that the skipper, getting the worst of it, ended by an appeal to the police. Naturally the constable he summoned, being a true servant of the law, took the side of the better dressed man, and Keith, foolishly surprised by this—for he was young and lacked experience—showed his resentment in a manner which fully justified the constable in attempting to remove him to the police station. Keith thereupon knocked the officer down, and having thus placed himself thoroughly in the wrong and realizing that a month's hard labour inexorably awaits all those who assault the police in the execution of their duty, he returned from the scene of his exploits with some precipitation, not staying even to collect the twelve and six admittedly due to him.

He dared not therefore stay in the town to seek work, and he made up his mind to tramp back to London. Today was the fourth day of his journey, and unwashen, half starved and in rags, he looked as desperate a character as any peaceable and quiet citizen might be reluctant to meet on a lonely road.

He walked on now, tired and footsore, for about a quarter of a mile till he came to where a path led from the road he was following into the wood by the wayside.

The darkness was increasing rapidly, and the idea came to him that perhaps he had better decide

to stay for the night in the shelter of these trees rather than go farther and perhaps have to sleep out in the open, with the risk of being pounced on by some vigilant police officer. For during these last few days he had discovered that to sleep out in the open by reason of being unable to pay for a bed is an offence against the majesty of the law of England. This discovery and the fact that he supposed a warrant was out for his arrest on a charge of assault—though in point of fact his policeman was a decent soul, bore no malice, and had never said anything about their little adventure—together tended to make him feel a good deal of an outlaw and somewhat hostile towards all settled authority. The law, he thought, was made by comfortable people in order that they might remain comfortable, and he being not comfortable—indeed quite otherwise—was in no mood to pay it more attention than needs must.

During these four days of tramping his temper had grown a little strained, desperate indeed and even reckless, and it remained so as he stumbled now easily through the wood, seeking a snug place where to lie down and sleep, and even dreaming that somewhere he might find some berries ripe enough to eat and stem the hunger gnawing at him.

It was a foolish hope, but it lured him on, and as he went he was aware of a curious impression as

though there was some creature that followed close by and watched him through the trees. The impression was so strong he called out once, but got no answer, and when he paused to listen he could hear nothing. The heavy silence underneath the trees was unbroken by the faintest sound, and yet still that impression remained of there being some living thing near by, following and watching. When presently he came to an open glade and had crossed it he paused suddenly and crouched down in thick bracken to watch and wait. But he saw nothing, and after a time resumed his way, only to be almost immediately again aware of the same sensation of being followed and watched, so that the thought came to him that these woods were less lonely than they seemed, and he was aware of a certain terror and vague alarm growing slowly in his mind.

However, the impression was only faint, and he tried to put it out of his mind, for it and his sensation of alarm seemed to him absurd, so that when he came to the end of the path and found to his surprise that it had led him to the pretty little house on the hill-side he had admired from the road below, he forgot his fears entirely in his surprise.

He stopped, expecting to be greeted by the loud barking of hostile dogs. But there was no sound at all, and again it came to him that about this place

there was something aloof and secret. He hesitated for a moment, and he felt his heart beat a little quicker than usual. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he stepped from the shelter of the trees and walked across the open grassy space that lay between him and the house.

"I'll beg for food," he said to himself bitterly; "why should I starve?"

The silence remained unbroken, all was still and quiet, nothing stirred, nor was there any sign of life apparent as he drew near the house.

Round it was a garden fenced in by a low hedge one passed through by means of a wooden gate. He pushed this open and entered, letting it close behind him with a bang and expecting that the noise would cause some one to appear. But no one came; no more silent and still lay the wood he had just come through than did this solitary and quiet house upon the hill-side.

CHAPTER II

The Deserted Home

He walked slowly round to the back door, and as he did so noticed that most of the windows were open, so that presumably the occupants of the house could not be very far away. He knocked, but no answer came, and when he knocked a second time, more loudly, there was still no answer.

In the west the setting sun had reached the horizon and the hush of the coming night lay upon all the land. Everything was very quiet and still, and the only sound that broke the utter silence all around was the echo of his own loud knocking when a third time he hammered with his closed fist on the door.

"They can't be far off," he said to himself, staring thoughtfully at the open window, and then he noticed that on the handle and latch of the kitchen door a spider had spun its web.

It seemed to him that this was strange, and he went round to the front and knocked still more loudly at the door there.

But no one answered or heeded his summons, and

the quietude of the place began to take to him a new significance, so that he remembered again that queer and daunting impression he had had while passing through the wood of an unseen presence, following and watching.

For a last time he knocked, and when he had waited a little and there was no answer, he went again to the back door where the spider had spun its web, and tried the latch. It lifted at once and the door swung open. For a moment he hesitated on the threshold, and standing there he shouted loudly:

“Is any one at home?”

Again there was no reply, but happening to look round he caught sight of something—what he could not see; it might have been a crouching man or a dog or even merely a cat prowling by—that moved quickly on the fringe of the trees and then vanished and showed suddenly and indistinctly for a moment again and once more was gone from sight.

The idea came to Keith that there was some creature in the wood, the same that had followed and watched him during his progress through it, and that this creature was greatly excited and agitated by his movements and his apparent intention to enter the house. Yet why this should be so and why this creature, whatever it might be,

did not come forward and forbid him or make some resistance or objection to his entry, he could not imagine. Puzzled and wary, with a feeling that all this was very strange and even a little sinister, Keith pushed the back door farther open and entered through it to the kitchen on which it opened. Very quickly he crossed at once to the window and looked out, expecting that his action would cause whatever was hiding in the wood to emerge.

But the wood lay quiet and solitary in the declining light of the dying day, perfectly still, utterly peaceful, the undisturbed shadows heavy beneath the untroubled trees. After he had watched for some minutes and seen nothing, he began to think it was all his own nervous imagination that had deceived him and that there was nothing there.

Turning from the window he glanced round. The kitchen was a bright airy room, with a table scrubbed to a shining cleanness in the middle of the floor and a large dresser well supplied with crockery opposite the window. There was a large open fireplace that did not seem to have been used of late, and he noticed that the clock on the mantelpiece had run down, and that here and there was a light covering of dust as though it were some time since the room had been occupied. He noticed, too, that there was some soot lying in various places, and at first he could not make out what had caused

this. But when he went into the scullery adjoining he discovered that the soot came from there, from a big oil stove that seemed to have been smoking badly and that had covered everything near it with soot of which some had floated into the kitchen.

On the stove was a saucepan containing eggs but no water, and next to it was a frying-pan with some very badly burnt bacon half smothered in soot. Keith looked at the saucepan containing the eggs and saw that it had boiled dry, and that a hole had been burnt in its bottom. He tried one of the eggs and found it was quite hard, and when he examined the lamps found them empty and the wicks much charred, so that apparently they had been allowed to burn themselves out. Obviously this accounted for the soot that was about, as the lamps would smoke badly before becoming finally extinguished.

"Whoever was frying the bacon and cooking the eggs must have been called away suddenly," Keith said, half aloud, "and never come back. Funny!"

Puzzled and thoughtful he went back into the kitchen and through the half-open door that led from it to the rest of the house.

"Any one here?" he shouted, and his voice came back to him hollowly and there was no other reply.

He went cautiously into the hall and the other

rooms on the ground floor. One was the drawing-room, a pretty, dainty, little apartment with art paper on the walls and many knick-knacks, some of which seemed of value. Keith noticed an engraving on the wall that looked to him very like a Méryon, though he was not sure. On a small table stood a Japanese vase, in it flowers that were dead from lack of water. Music was open on the piano; books and current magazines lay about, one face downwards on a chair as though some one reading it had put it down for a moment meaning to pick it up again at once. On one chair was an illustrated paper; on another some fancy work, the needle, threaded with yellow silk, still sticking in it as though it, too, had only been laid aside momentarily. Across the small hall was the dining-room where the table was spread for a meal, breakfast apparently, since there was toast and marmalade, cold ham, and an open box of sardines, and under a cosy a silver coffee pot of which the contents had long been cold. Places were laid for two people, but the meal, though ready, had not been begun, for the plates and cups were all quite clean.

More and more puzzled Keith went back into the hall and shouted up the stairs:

“Is there any one there?”

No answer came, and after a moment's hesitation he went back into the dining-room. The bread

on the table was stale but quite eatable. There was butter, too, and the cold ham, though dry on the outside, had an appetizing appearance. Keith's hunger had seemed to slacken as he made these investigations, but now it returned with pangs keener even than before. Indeed he was nearly starving, for he had eaten nothing at all for twenty-four hours, and for the three days previously hardly as much as would have made him one good meal in former days. He broke off a piece of bread and put it in his mouth, and a bit of ham followed; before he was well aware what he was doing he was sitting at the table making a hearty meal.

He ate quickly, fiercely, almost recklessly, and when the thought came to him that perhaps the occupants of the house would return and find him busy with their food, sitting at their table, he told himself he did not care; all that mattered was his hunger and the chance that had come to satisfy it.

When at last he had had enough he got up and went back into the hall. He felt physically a great deal better and stronger for his meal, but his mood was reckless and angry, for he supposed that now he would be considered guilty of both house-breaking and theft, and was liable to heavy punishment—penal servitude, perhaps, for all he knew. And it seemed to him unjust that only thus had he

been able to still the hunger that had tormented him.

"I suppose I had better see what's in the rest of the place," he said to himself, and went upstairs.

It was nearly dark now, and heavy shadows lay in all the corners and on the landing at the head of the stairs. Opposite to him were two doors. He opened one and found himself in a bedroom that by the evidence of the articles on the toilet table and of some clothing lying about had been occupied by a woman. The bed was not made, and evidently the room had not been tidied since it was last used. Opening the other door he went into the next room. This was quite tidy and had obviously not been used for some time; presumably it was the spare room. There were two other rooms at the back: one used as a box-room, for it had no furniture and contained a good deal of miscellaneous lumber, and the other apparently intended for the use of a servant. Here also the bed was unmade, and various objects were littered about as though left by some one who had every intention of returning very shortly. There was also a bath-room, and here Keith noticed a shaving brush and soap and a silver shaving mirror, so that evidently there had been a man about.

He went back into the bedroom and looked in the wardrobe and in the drawers and found there

was plenty of men's clothing including boots and slippers at the bottom of a cupboard. Presumably, therefore, the lady had been married, and this was the room shared by her and her husband, but as all the masculine clothing was somewhat carefully put away and none lying about, he had probably not been staying in the house just recently. Keith also found a case of razors in one of the drawers, and it was this that first put it into his head to reflect that he was very dirty and had not had a bath or a shave for a long time.

He began to rummage about and had soon collected a complete outfit of underclothing as well as a light tweed suit that seemed to fit him very well.

"May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," he said to himself recklessly, and he went down to the scullery and filled the lamps of the oil stove from a gallon tin of oil that was standing near. He trimmed the wicks and soon had the stove going and some water on to heat. As soon as it boiled he took a jugful up to the bath-room and treated himself to the luxury of a shave, and afterwards he heated more water and had a bath and changed his own filthy rags for the clothing he had got ready.

Bathed, shaved, respectably dressed, he was changed as if by magical transformation from the desperate looking ruffian of an hour or two earlier into as goodly a youth as any one could wish to see,

and he needed but one thing to make his content complete. A short search in the dining-room provided it, for in the sideboard was a box of cigars, and he helped himself to one and lighted it and began to smoke.

"I suppose I am a burglar," he thought, "but anyhow this is a jolly sight better than dossing out under the trees, wet through with dew and twisted up with hunger. Who cares?"

His mood was indeed perfectly reckless. Life he considered, not perhaps with so complete a justification as he assumed, had treated him harshly and unfairly, and he told himself he had a right to take the good that came his way.

"A jolly fool I should have been," he thought, "to clear off and sleep out under a tree when there was food and shelter and clothing lying wasting here with no one to use them."

He enjoyed that cigar as only one who has been long deprived of tobacco can enjoy a good smoke, and he had finished it and was wondering whether to help himself to another when quite suddenly there came a knocking at the front door, a sharp, quick, hurried knock that went echoing and sounding through the whole house.

CHAPTER III

A Visitor

He laid down the cigar box he had been fingering doubtfully, and he listened quietly and without moving. The knock was repeated, quick and imperative, and Keith rose slowly to his feet.

"Now to face the music," he said to himself, and he went quickly out of the room and across the hall to the front door and opened it.

On the threshold was standing a tall, slim girl with dark eyes and a grave and pale face. Her features were thin and not very regular, the nose being a little too prominent, the mouth a little too large. The cheek bones were a little high, too, and indeed she might have been called plain but for the fineness of the clear, smooth skin, the depth and beauty of the dark eyes and the perfection of the broad, serene forehead from which the hair was brushed back tightly beneath a small closely-fitting felt hat. She held herself very upright, with a certain suggestion of pliant vigour, and Keith noticed

that her limbs were long and her hands and feet by no means specially small. She had ridden up on a bicycle, for she had her hand on one she had just placed to lean against the side of the house, and though she looked very intently and searchingly at Keith she did not speak.

He did not speak, either, but stood quietly, waiting for her to begin, and the pause allowed him to notice every detail of her appearance. He felt, too, that she on her part was watching him closely from those great dark eyes, and that this intent gaze of hers was hostile and even contemptuous. He wondered if she knew who he was and how he had come there, and he felt his temper beginning to rise under the slow scorn of her watchful gaze.

There was, however, in this enmity her manner seemed to show, no suggestion of fear or doubt or suspicion; it was rather as though he were some one whom she knew well and utterly despised. But then it seemed quite impossible that she should really know him, and it occurred to him at once that most likely she was taking him for some one else, presumably the rightful tenant of the house whose food he had eaten and whose clothes he was wearing. But then if the girl were really under such an impression it followed that she could never have seen this unknown tenant, and why, therefore, should she appear so hostile towards him? Keith,

through whose mind all these considerations flashed like lightning, determined to be careful and cautious in what he said, and to endeavour, if possible, to find out what the girl knew or believed about him without in any way betraying himself.

"I have come to see my sister," she said suddenly and abruptly, her voice quiet and low and yet singularly clear.

"Yes," he answered hesitatingly. "Yes. She lives here?"

For some reason his words seemed to fan to sudden flame the smouldering fires of her wrath.

"How dare you?" she cried, and she lifted her hands so that for the moment he believed she was about to strike him. But the gesture was only one of passionate indignation, and she said again: "How dare you? oh, how dare you?"

"But I assure you," he began and paused and felt himself flush red, so fierce and scorching was the indignation in her angry eyes.

"Do you suppose," she said bitterly, "that whatever you assure me, I should ever believe one word you say?"

"Well, if you don't," he remarked, "it doesn't seem much use my saying anything, does it?"

"Do you think you have any reason to expect me to believe you?" she demanded.

He hesitated, reflecting that after all, since the

very clothes on his back were not his own, he had perhaps no right to reply in the affirmative.

"I insist on seeing my sister," she said, and swept past him with a movement into the hall.

He drew back with a slight bow, and she went into the drawing-room of which the door he had left open was on her right. She gave a glance round to assure herself no one was there, and then came out and went into the dining-room. He followed her, and she, after one quick look round, went out again without noticing him, while he busied himself lighting the tall brass lamp that stood in one corner of the room. He drew the curtains, too, and while he did so heard her light firm footsteps overhead as she went swiftly into one room after another. When he had drawn the blinds he sat down in the comfortable arm-chair he had been occupying, when her knock disturbed him, and soon he heard her coming downstairs again. She came to the door of the room and stood there in the flooding lamp-light, and her face was more pale, her eyes more large and bright, even than before.

"She is not here," she said; "where is she?"

"I don't know," he answered, after a pause for reflection.

"Liar," she answered, very slowly and distinctly.

He went very red, for even a tramp, even a reckless housebreaker does not like to be called a liar

by a woman, nor to be addressed in tones of such vivid and intense scorn. He half rose from his chair and sat down again.

"Of course," he said, "if you were a man I should throw you out of the house for that. As you are a woman I can only repeat that I do not know."

"It is a lie," she repeated.

"Oh, well," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "you gave me fair warning you would not believe a word I said."

"Where is she?" she repeated, and she came a little nearer and stood slim and upright above him, her head thrown back, one hand held out, like a young goddess threatening to unloose the powers of her wrath.

"What is the use of my saying anything if you won't believe a word I do say?" he asked.

She did not reply, but stood looking down at him, and he felt a certain discomfort grow and increase in him beneath the scrutiny of those clear searching eyes. They seemed to know ; and he felt it to be true that he was not treating her quite fairly since plainly she took him for some one else, probably the rightful tenant of the house. But he did not see that he could explain the truth to her. For one thing she would very likely refuse to believe a story that would sound to her a little fantastic perhaps; and besides he did not feel too much inclined to

make the experiment. The bitterness of her manner, the contempt apparent in her every word and look, had very distinctly ruffled his temper, even although he realized that her hostility was really aimed at some one else. Still he had had to bear the brunt of it, and he had not found that pleasant—nor pleasant to feel that if she knew the truth and what an awful intruder he was here, her scorn of him would probably grow greater and increase.

Quite suddenly she said:

“Do you mean she has gone home?”

“Well, do you know,” he answered reflectively, “I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if that weren’t it.”

She found both his tone and manner unsatisfactory and seemed to hesitate, as though doubtful and suspicious and yet in part, at least, inclined to believe him. She did not speak nor did he, and as they watched each other silently they both heard distinctly a sound in the room above, a sound that was exactly like the very cautious opening and shutting of a window. The girl swung round quickly.

“Oh, she’s there all the time,” she cried, and was out of the room like a flash.

Keith sat still and listened to her light steps flying up the stairs. He heard her fling open the door of the bedroom and run in—and the next moment her voice shrilled out in a loud and fearful cry like that of a soul parting in agony.

He sprang from his seat, dashed up the stairs three or four at a time, and flung himself across the landing into the room. It was empty save for the girl herself, who lay still and unconscious on the floor in the middle of the room, nor was there anything at all to tell what had happened or what had alarmed her so. He look all round quickly, and then ran to the window and looked out. There was nothing, nothing at all, to account for that awful scream of terror, and he turned back to the unconscious figure of the girl, prone upon the carpet. He turned her on her back. She was quite unconscious, but did not seem to be hurt in any way, and when he got some water from the bathroom and splashed a few drops on her face—he did not know what else to do—she began to show signs of recovery.

With a low sigh she opened her eyes and looked round, and at once put her hands before them as if to shut out some awful sight.

“What was it?” she muttered hoarsely; “what was it?”

“Are you better now?” he asked, kneeling beside her. “Drink some of this.”

He offered her some water, and she supped a little and then pushed it from her and got unsteadily to her feet.

“What happened?” he asked; “what was it?”

"You know," she said shakenly; "you know—don't you?"

"No," he answered. "I don't really; I haven't the least idea. I heard you cry out and I rushed up and there was nothing at all. What was it?"

"I don't know," she said; "I don't know."

"You must know what made you cry out like that," he insisted, vexed, for he saw that she distrusted him.

She made no answer, and it was evident more than half believed that he was responsible for whatever had happened. And that something had occurred to frighten her very badly was plain from her ashen face and trembling limbs.

"Look here," he said with an impulse to try to explain the truth to her, "you are making a great mistake. I am not what you think; I——"

"You think you can talk me over as you talked her over, I suppose?" she interrupted wearily; "but I don't want to know anything at all except where my sister is. When you have told so many lies, why should you expect me to believe you now?"

Without waiting for an answer she turned and went unsteadily out of the room and down the stairs. He followed and found her preparing to start off on her bicycle. But she was plainly not fit to go alone, for she was trembling violently and her hands were

shaking so that she could hardly hold the bicycle upright.

"You had better wait a bit," he said to her. "And I wish you would tell me what made you cry out like that?"

"I expect you know," she answered moodily.

"Well, I don't," he insisted. "Why not tell me? What was it?"

"I don't know," she answered again, and once more she shivered.

He made an impatient movement, angry at what he thought her obstinacy, and turned back to the house. But once more he turned to her.

"You aren't fit to go like that," he said. "Won't you wait a little, or shall I come with you?"

"No," she flashed, her spirit greater than her fears; "no, I would rather—see—that again than have you with me."

"All right," he said sulkily.

She mounted her bicycle and rode away down the hill to the road. He could still see her in the pale twilight till she reached the road, but then she at once vanished from sight, and he stood for a few minutes leaning against the door post.

"A regular little spitfire, a little Tartar," he said to himself, "but I wonder what it all means, and what on earth scared her so badly up there? It's

all jolly rummy, and I would give a good deal to know what made her faint like that."

He turned and was in the act of entering the house when, as he stepped into the hall, a cheery voice hailed him from without:

"Oh, good evening, good evening," it said, "good evening, Mr. Wentworth."

CHAPTER IV

The Vicar

The effect was so startling that had not his nerves been under good control he would have screamed out nearly as loudly as had done his late visitor at whatever had frightened her in the room above.

By a supreme effort he controlled himself and turned quietly and leisurely round.

"Yes . . . who is it?" he asked.

A small rotund figure came out of the dim night and stood on the threshold where the beam of yellow light fell from the lamp within.

"Really, I must apologize for such an extremely late visit," said the stranger, "but the fact is I was just passing and I saw your light, and I have been meaning all week to get over to call, so when I saw Mrs. Wentworth pass on her bicycle—it was Mrs. Wentworth, was it not?"

"Oh, yes," answered Keith slowly, "yes, it would be her, I expect."

"I thought so, though I could not be quite certain in the darkness," continued the stranger. "A great acquisition to our parish, if I may say so. I am

only sorry you are in such a very out-of-the-way part of it. Mrs. Morgan is hoping to get over to call, but she finds it a little difficult as it is too far to walk; she doesn't cycle; and a conveyance is not at all easy to arrange for; so when I saw your light I thought to myself that here was an opportunity for me to look in and introduce myself."

He paused and beamed cheerfully on his host, and Keith smiled back nearly as cheerfully, immensely relieved to gather from this that the personality of the real Mr. Wentworth was unknown to this new-comer who, from what he said, was evidently a Mr. Morgan and the vicar of the parish.

"I am sure it was most good of you to come," he said genially; "won't you come in a minute?"

The vicar thanked him profusely, objected on the score of the lateness of the hour, but yielded finally to a renewed invitation and followed into the drawing-room, where Keith lit the lamp and drew the curtains while his new visitor established himself in a comfortable chair and accepted with many thanks a cigar from the box Keith offered him.

"Very kind of you, very kind indeed," he purred. "I hope Mrs. Wentworth permits smoking in her drawing-room?"

"Oh, yes, I don't think she objects at all," answered Keith airily, thinking there was much else she would object to more just at this moment.

He took a seat opposite his visitor and helped himself to a fresh cigar. With a kind of grim inner amusement he reflected that they must present a very comfortable and intimate picture, and he wondered what would happen if the real Mr. Wentworth—since that was evidently the name of the rightful occupant of the house—should return unexpectedly. But his mood was wild and reckless; he even told himself that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and that if the genuine Wentworth did appear he would face the situation out, refuse to admit the other's identity, and order him off.

"Let him sleep out under the trees for once," he thought; "it won't do the chap any harm; and I feel like a good bed for once—lord, if he comes I'll give him the surprise of his life and bluff him till he won't know which of us is really which."

The jest of it appealed to him strongly in his present reckless mood, and his eyes shone with mischief and laughter at the prospect. And evidently not the faintest suspicion had as yet entered the mind of his present visitor, who leaning back in his easy chair, smoking the excellent cigar Keith had given him, and keeping up a constant stream of cheerful gossip about the parish and its inhabitants, seemed very comfortable indeed.

"I can assure you," he said, "that I cycle a good many hundred miles a year in the course of my

duties—thousands I might say indeed. It is a very widely scattered parish, especially this end of it, which is I suppose the loneliest, wildest district in the county; in the whole of this part of England indeed. Possibly that is an attraction in your eyes, though, Mr. Wentworth?"

"Upon my word, I don't know but that it is," Keith agreed.

"Are you expecting to stay long?" Mr. Morgan inquired.

"I hardly know; my plans are not very settled yet," answered Keith cautiously.

"I see, I see," smiled Mr. Morgan. "And how does Mrs. Wentworth like it here?—very well, I hope?"

"I think," answered Keith, "I think I may say she is charmed. I am afraid," he added, "I shall have to ask you to excuse her tonight; I rather think she has begun her preparations for retiring."

Mr. Morgan seemed to take this as a hint to be off, for he rose almost at once, declaring he must go. Keith tried to persuade him to stay, but he insisted on going and began to apologize again for putting in an appearance so late.

"Though really," he repeated, "the parish is so large, and I find it so difficult to cover it all, that when I saw your light as I was riding through File's Wood——"

"You came through the wood?" Keith interrupted.

"Yes, it saves a short distance," answered Mr. Morgan and smiled. "And I make it a point of honour to show how little I care for the stories about the place," he added.

"Oh, yes, the stories," said Keith. "I wish you would tell me what they are exactly. I have heard all sorts of hints, but nothing definite."

"Well, of course, there are all sorts of tales," answered Mr. Morgan. "I discourage them as much as I can, but I suppose they are really very ancient, and there seems to be quite good authority for supposing that Files Wood is a corruption of Fiend's Wood."

"Indeed," said Keith, "that's interesting."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Morgan, "the idea that the Devil, *in propria person*, walks in the wood seems to have come down from very early times, and of late for some reason or another there has been quite a revival of the stories. Mrs. Wilson—but Mrs. Wilson is not so sober as she might be, I fear, though undoubtedly there have been some very strange and still unexplained cases of disappearance in this neighbourhood."

"Disappearance?" repeated Keith, starting in spite of himself.

"Yes," answered Mr. Morgan; "and naturally

when that does happen, it is at once believed that the missing person has met the Fiend walking in the wood and been carried off by him."

"What an idea," said Keith, and laughed, though not quite naturally, for he could not help remembering how strangely the inhabitants of this house appeared to have vanished.

"Oh, I assure you it's widely believed," declared Mr. Morgan, "and so I make a point whenever I can of cycling through the wood. But the worst of it is that when I tell my good parishioners what I've done, and that I neither saw nor heard anything out of the way, they only shake their heads and hint that it's safe enough for me—he would never venture to show himself to me. A compliment to my cloth, I suppose."

He laughed cheerfully and presently cycled off, and when he had gone Keith bolted and locked the front door very carefully, noticing as he did so that the fastenings seemed new and of unusual strength. He would not admit it even to himself, but certainly he was more glad than before that he was not going to pass the night in the open under the trees of File's Wood that once had been named Fiend's Wood. He went into the drawing-room and secured the windows with equal care, noticing that here, too, the fastenings seemed new and unusually secure, and that the outside shutters pro-

vided were very strong. This was in fact the case all over the house; everywhere pains seemed to have been taken to provide complete security against any intrusion from without; it was almost as though some attack or assault had been feared and had been provided against. Even the back door, in addition to two strong bolts, was provided with a stout iron bar that went right across it. Lamp in hand Keith went into each room in turn, making all secure for the night and assuring himself, though a little ashamed of the precaution, that no one and nothing was in hiding anywhere. He found a door he had overlooked before that apparently led down to the cellar, and this also he made secure with the fastenings provided, telling himself as he did so that it was too late to bother tonight seeing what was down there. As an additional safeguard he placed a chair against it, and when he had thus made all the ground floor safe against any possible intrusion he went back to the drawing-room, and as he put down his lamp on the table in the centre he heard distinctly the sound of a soft and cautious footstep overhead.

For a moment he hesitated; he was as brave as most men; but there was something in that soft, padding sound that seemed to grip his heart with sudden terror and make his mouth go dry. Then he snatched the lamp and ran quickly upstairs and

went hurriedly into each one of the rooms and searched them thoroughly, absurdly thoroughly indeed, for he looked under beds, in cupboards, even into drawers that by no possibility could have served as places of concealment. He found not the least trace or sign of anything to account for what he had heard, and he told himself that in all probability it was only a trick of his imagination, some such noise as houses are always full of and that his nerves had translated into the sound of a footstep.

The explanation did not satisfy him in the least, but when he had made all the windows fast up here, too, and secured the shutters they were all provided with, he told himself he was at all events very sure that he was the only person under that roof and that no one could possibly obtain admittance without his knowledge.

Satisfied of that, he went into the bedroom and found a suit of pyjamas, for he was minded to take full advantage of the gifts the gods had strewn in his way and to spend one comfortable night at least. The bed in the spare room was fully made, and doubts as to whether it was aired did not occur to him. He decided to sleep in this room rather than in the other, and very soon he was undressed and in bed.

But the novelty of his position prevented him from sleeping, and his half-conscious, guilty expectation of the arrival of the rightful tenants also served to make him restless. For long he lay awake, straining his nerves at every tiniest sound, and going over and over again in his mind the events of this strange night.

For what reason, he wondered, had the occupants of the house quitted it so abruptly and with every sign of extreme haste so that they had stayed neither to eat the meal they had prepared nor even to bar door and window against intruders.

Was it panic that had driven them away like that, or what?

Certainly it must have been something very pressing indeed, strangely pressing.

It ran in his mind that Mr. Morgan had said that there had been several cases of mysterious disappearance in that neighbourhood.

And why, he wondered, were all doors and windows provided with such strong fastenings? Had the occupants of the house known of some danger threatening them? and if so, did it come from that oddly named wood where he himself had been aware of such curious sensations?

And then that girl who had visited him, asking for her sister? Who was she, and who was her

sister, and what had frightened her so terribly and so strangely that she either could not or would not say what it was?

He found a clear vision of her face as she had looked when she rode away come very vividly before his eyes; it was there when at last, tired out, he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep from which he wakened with a cry and a sharp pain at his throat, where a horrible pressure was squeezing the life from him. He heard himself give a muffled gurgling cry and instinctively he tore at the devilish clasp about his neck; by a violent and supreme effort he jerked himself sideways and felt the fingers at his throat slacken and loosen their grip. He struck out wildly, fiercely, in the darkness, but there was nothing there, and he heard the door of his room close gently and softly as though some one had just gone very quietly out . . . or else come in.

CHAPTER V

The Hidden Store

For a little Keith remained crouching by the bed, panting and breathless, half anticipating a new attack. But all was very still and quiet in the darkness, and he heard no sound or movement anywhere, either in the room or without.

Cautiously he put out his hand and groped for the matches he knew he had left near. He found them and struck one and looked round slowly and expectantly. The room was empty, the door was shut, all was as it had been before, only the tumbled condition of the bed suggested that anything unusual had happened. He might almost have thought it had merely been a bad dream of which he had been the victim, but his throat still hurt him, and when he looked at himself in the glass he saw that it was bruised and swollen and that it showed the black traces of encircling fingers.

"Who—what—can it have been?" he muttered.

He felt very cold, and yet he was perspiring freely, and he pulled on his coat and trousers and

thrust his feet into his slippers. He struck another match and glanced round for something to serve as a weapon, but could see nothing; even the chairs were of too slight a make to be of any use. The lamp he had brought upstairs with him the night before was on the dressing-table and he lighted it, and then thought that if he took it with him it might betray him to a lurking enemy, and so blew it out again. He crossed on tiptoe to the door and opened it with extreme caution, and for a long time he remained crouching on the threshold, listening and waiting, intent for the faintest indication of the presence of his assailant.

Out here on the landing the darkness was much deeper than it had been in the bedroom, where he had had the blind up and the window open. Here the only faint glimmer of light came through the closed skylight through which a far, bright star was visible, and this glimmer was so faint and weak it seemed to serve only to make the darkness more intense.

As he crouched there in the dark Keith felt his courage returning, his nerves growing firm again. He had been a good deal shaken by the sudden and mysterious attack made upon him in his profound slumber, but now the effect of it was beginning to pass away and he told himself grimly that if he could lay hands on his unknown assailant he

would show him the difference between attacking a man in his sleep and meeting one awake and prepared.

He had expected that some sound, some movement, would tell him where his adversary was, but the perfect stillness of the night was broken by no sound. It occurred to him that it might be better to wait for daylight, but the anger steadily rising in him at the attack he had been subjected to overbore such prudent counsels. He straightened himself from the position in which he had been crouching, and very carefully and cautiously, and yet with a certain light swiftness of movement, he set himself to the task of finding his enemy who must, he was convinced, be hiding somewhere in the house. First of all he locked each room in turn on the outside and then, after looking in the cupboard at the head of the stairs lest any one should be hiding there and finding it full only of clothes, he unlocked each room in turn and searched each one thoroughly, locking each one again behind him as he left it. When he had done this with all the rooms in turn and made sure there was no one lurking in any of them, he went downstairs to the ground floor and searched the rooms there in the same way, as carefully and systematically, making sure by locking each one behind him and pocketing the key that his unknown enemy was

not avoiding him in the darkness or slipping from one hiding place to another.

It was a strange and weird experience, trying to the nerves and to the courage, to search thus room after room in the dark night, with no light save the glimmer from the matches he struck sometimes, tensely ready for a rush from any corner, for an attack at any moment, expecting each second to find himself locked in a wild fight for life. It was a long process, too, for he was so certain he must come upon his adversary sooner or later, since escape seemed to him impossible, that he often crouched and waited or stood breathless in dark shadows, straining to hear some sound to tell him where the other lurked. Whoever this other might be he seemed cunning and subtle beyond the common, and Keith felt that unless he used every precaution and every care he would find himself attacked at a disadvantage that might easily be fatal.

The dawn was near, the darkness less heavy than it had been, when at last his task was completed, the house searched from top to bottom, and he himself convinced that beneath that roof he was the only living creature. Bewildered, and with fear growing on him again, he stood chilled to the bone in the chill, bare kitchen, and asked himself wonderingly by what possibility, by what trick or secret means, his enemy had escaped.

Now, too, he looked and found that every one of the fastenings with which so carefully he had secured doors and windows the night before was still intact, and when he had assured himself of this fact he could not help the little thrill of superstitious awe that ran through him, or check entirely an inclination to glance quickly over his shoulder lest unseen there should be standing there some awful and threatening apparition.

He went quickly to the dining-room. A tantalus was on the sideboard, but as he had not the key he had not touched it the night before, since he did not wish to cause any needless damage. But now, thinking that when one had been nearly murdered in a house one acquires certain rights and privileges in it, he smashed the lock with a coal hammer he had picked up in the kitchen to serve as a weapon if necessary, and helped himself to a good stiff glass of whiskey and soda. Taking the coal hammer with him, and feeling a good deal better for his drink, he went back to the room where he had been sleeping and locking the door, and further securing it with a chair he put against it at an angle under the handle, he lay down on the bed.

But, in spite of his fatigue, it was broad day before he fell asleep, and then it was a troubled and uneasy slumber that came to him. Once at least

he started up, bathed in perspiration, and with the impression that again he was experiencing that deadly and fatal grip upon his throat. And once he thought he heard a slow padding step outside his door, but he lay still and did not move, and the sound was not repeated.

He slept soundly at last, and when he woke it was quite late. He dressed and went downstairs very cautiously, his coal hammer in his hand, ready for any attack that might be made on him. But all was quiet and still, each room was empty, and when he threw back the shutters and let in the fresh morning air and the bright sunshine he began to feel even a little ashamed of his fears and terrors of the night.

The idea even came to him that perhaps he had only suffered from a bad nightmare.

But the marks upon his throat were still there, and he made certain once again that on the doors and windows the fastenings he had secured the night before had not been tampered with.

How, then, his mysterious assailant had entered and left the house he could not conceive, and he could not help remembering that the wood near by had once been called Fiend's Wood, and reflecting that his predecessors in the occupation of this house had apparently vanished in a very sudden and inexplicable manner.

“And then,” he mused, “what can it have been that scared that girl so badly in the bedroom upstairs last night?”

His experience of the night suggested that her terror had not been without some substantial foundation.

He opened the back door and went out to see if he could find anything outside to throw any light on the mystery. But he found no footprints, nor indeed any marks of any kind in any way unusual or suspicious, though he did find a tin containing a quart of new milk and half a dozen eggs on the sill of the kitchen window.

He supposed that they had come from a local farm from which they had been ordered, and had been left early in the morning by some one who had been told not to disturb the inmates of the house. He took the eggs and boiled two of them on the oil stove, making with the help of the cold ham a very good breakfast in spite of his disturbed night. Then he helped himself without scruple, on his theory that having been nearly murdered in the house he had acquired certain rights in it, to a cigar from the box in the dining-room, and began to make a new and more systematic examination of his abode.

He found nothing of any great interest and nothing at all to throw any light on the many points

that were puzzling him so profoundly. There were no letters and few papers of any sort, though he came across the name "Wentworth" once or twice. In the cellar he found a good supply of potatoes and a barrel of paraffin oil, so that there was plenty of fuel for his little stove. The pantry, too, was well stocked with provisions, including a quantity of tinned stuff, meat and fruit and sardines, a small sack of flour, and a side of bacon. There was enough, he thought, for two or three weeks, or even more; and besides there seemed to be a good deal of fruit and vegetables growing in the garden, so that no shortage of food was likely for as long as there was any probability of his staying there.

Before he went down into the cellar he took the precaution of screwing back the door lest his unknown and illusive enemy should come upon him suddenly and make him a prisoner by shutting and fastening it upon him. But no such attempt was made, he heard and saw nothing of any other living creature, and no one came near the place; he did not even see any one pass along the road at the bottom of the hill on which the house stood.

Another thing he did in the cellar was to sound the floor of it carefully and to pour water on one or two spots to assure himself that the brick floor had not recently been disturbed. For the grim thought was in his mind that had the attack on

him the previous night succeeded his body would have had to be concealed somewhere, and possibly—just possibly—if some such fate as that he had so narrowly escaped had overtaken the vanished tenants of the place, their bodies might have been hidden under the flooring of the cellar. With the same idea in his mind he examined the flooring of each room and, finding a long flue brush in a cupboard under the stairs, he pushed it up the chimneys in case anything had been hidden there.

He discovered nothing, however, and all this had taken him so long that he was getting hungry again. So he stopped to cook himself some dinner and cleared up afterwards, and then, having comforted himself with a fresh cigar, he resumed his search upstairs.

In the principal bedroom he found little of interest, though in a small drawer of the dressing-table he came upon some money, about fifteen pounds, an additional proof of the extreme haste with which the place had been abandoned. There was also a small, cheap revolver which was unloaded and out of order, and a good deal of somewhat expensive-looking clothing.

Indeed, so far as he could judge, everything in the house was of very good quality, as though there had been no lack of money on the part of its former occupants. Besides the Méryon, there were one

or two other engravings in the drawing-room that looked good. And there was an ivory paper knife mounted in gold, two or three of the photograph frames were of solid silver, some of the china looked good, and in the sideboard there was a "canteen" as the shopkeepers call them, a solid mahogany case containing knives, spoons, and forks, the knives with ivory handles and the spoons and forks of solid silver. The thing must have cost at least fifty pounds. In the bedroom, too, there were a good many small objects of value, and in a case on the dressing-table some jewellery, a brooch, two or three rings, and a bracelet, and one or two other things that appeared to be worth a little money. Keith was inclined to suppose that the contents of the house must be worth at least a thousand pounds and perhaps more.

He searched the three bedrooms as carefully as he had done the downstairs rooms without finding anything of importance. He lifted the carpets and examined the chimney in each room, and then went into the boxroom where there was the usual sort of miscellaneous collection characteristic of such places. One specially big packing case contained a number of old papers and books and magazines, and his examination was so close and careful he thought it worth while to take these out and glance through them and move the case that had

held them. In doing so he noticed that one board of the bare floor, just where this case had stood, was fastened down with nails whose heads seemed a little new, and when he looked more closely he saw, too, that one side of this board was a little marked and broken as though it had recently been lifted.

The marks were very slight; at any other time he would never have noticed them; but now he was keyed up to an unusual pitch of keenness. He had a hammer and screw-driver he had found in the kitchen, and he set to work and by their aid he unfastened and lifted the board.

In the cavity beneath, between the floor of this room and the ceiling of that beneath, there was one of those flat cane dispatch-boxes which of recent years have grown popular. He drew it out, really excited, for it seemed to him he had found something at last. It was locked, but he forced the hasp with his screw-driver and threw back the lid, exposing a tumbled mass of shining jewellery, sparkling and glittering wonderfully in the bright sunshine that streamed in by the open window.

CHAPTER VI

Temptation

His first impulse was to spring to his feet and lock the door of the room that he might be secure against any interruption—he and his new-found treasure.

Next, slowly and carefully, he took out the shining contents of the dispatch-case and arranged the pretty things in glittering, sparkling rows upon the floor; and when he had finished that plain ordinary little lumber room seemed changed into a king's treasure chamber.

There was one great diamond necklace made of three and thirty wonderful stones, and another necklace of lovely pearls perfectly matched. There was bracelet upon bracelet mounted with precious stones. There were many rings, too, and brooches, and a great store of about a gross of wedding rings, all of pure gold. And there were brooches and gold chains, and tiaras, and many other trinkets, till as they lay there where he had placed them upon the floor it seemed to Keith that they outshone in splendour even the sun itself.

His face was flushed, his eyes were very bright and eager, his hands trembled as he put them nervously to his throat and tugged at his collar as though all at once he experienced a difficulty in breathing.

For the thought in his mind was this, that here at his feet lay a fortune—his for the taking. A fortune that would for ever make him secure against such hunger and misery and despair as he had known of late.

The temptation shook him from head to foot as though some actual physical force had him in its grip. He had become a little giddy and his mouth was parched and very dry. Creeping to the door on tiptoe he listened intently with his ear to the keyhole for any sound that might suggest he had been watched or overlooked. And this time he listened and waited not as before in readiness for anything that might chance, but furtively and uneasily and with a new and ignoble fear.

For now his fear was not the natural and even wholesome terror of threatening danger that even the bravest know though ready to face all, but simply and solely a dread lest he should be—seen.

His mind was made up. He had found this hidden store of jewellery and he would use it to protect himself against the brutality of the world that had treated him unfairly and callously. He

told himself he had as good a right to this treasure as any one, and that when accident had thrown it in his way under circumstances so peculiar and mysterious he would be a fool indeed to neglect his opportunity.

He went back and began feverishly to replace the treasure in the dispatch-case from which he had taken it. It was not late yet, and he thought that if he hurried he might well be miles distant with his booty before darkness fell. He would sell or pawn some of the less valuable articles till he got enough to take him abroad or to America, and there he would start a new life, forgetting the nightmare that lay behind.

It seemed to him also that his discovery of this hidden hoard offered in part at least an explanation of what had happened. No doubt whoever or whatever had attacked him during the night knew of the existence of the treasure, was searching for it, and feared lest he should find it first. True, he did not quite see that it accounted for the way in which the house had been left, but perhaps the Mr. Wentworth, who had been apparently the late tenant, had known nothing of it, and had been lured away in order to leave the place free. Or was it possible he had known of it, that the hoard was his, and that he had been disposed of by a similar attack to that made on Keith?

For what reason, too, had jewellery of such value been kept in such a hiding place? And, indeed, what was so great and rich a treasure doing in a lonely country cottage? Was it perhaps the accumulated plunder of some gang of thieves? Was the vanished and mysterious Mr. Wentworth their chief? In that case, was it possible that some threat or danger of a visit from the police accounted for the hasty flight of which the cottage had been the scene?

All these and fifty other theories and suggestions passed through his mind as he finished replacing the jewellery in the dispatch-case, which he secured, since the lock was broken, with straps.

This done, he began to make very hurriedly his own preparations for departure. He had put all scruple far behind him, his resolution was fierce and settled, his mind made up, and he went downstairs with a quick alert tread, ready to dare all, do all, risk all, to keep possession of his treasure.

It was at the very bottom of the stairs, as he stepped into the hall, that a thought wandered as it were into his mind of this girl visitor who had come there asking for her sister, and whose pale, grave face seemed suddenly to rise before him with startling clearness. The scorn in those dark deep eyes, too; how clearly he remembered it, and how it had galled, how he had resented it even then

when he had known it must rest on some misapprehension.

His hand was already stretched out to the front door when it came very suddenly and clearly into his mind that if she could see him now, that high scorn of him her manner had so plainly shown would be redoubled, intensified—and justified. He felt himself flush at the thought.

“Oh, well,” he said defiantly, but his hand held out to the door dropped back to his side.

Yes, how she would despise him, how her high scorn of what he did would show in her deep, clear-shining eyes. And she would be right, for after all what was he now but a thief in flight with his stolen property?

Hitherto what Keith had done had presented itself to him in his reckless and bitter mood chiefly in the light of a daring jest played at the expense of one of those comfortable people to whose class he himself belonged, but who of late had chosen to treat him as a pariah and an outcast. Besides, for a man in bitter need to take food and shelter that lay in his way, unused and unwanted by anybody else, was one thing, and Keith still felt more than half justified in what he had done up till now. Then, too, his curiosity had been piqued by the strange circumstances of the case, and later his anger roused by the murderous and treacherous

attack made on him. But it was a different thing altogether to run away with a great treasure and to appropriate to his own use this hidden hoard he had found.

"Oh, hang it all," he said aloud.

He flung down the dispatch-case and stood for a long time, shaken by doubts and hesitation and strong temptation and desire. On the one hand there was in that little dispatch-case he could carry easily in one hand the means to secure for him a life of ease and comfort, of usefulness perhaps, his own welfare to his dying day and the respect and admiration of his fellows. On the other hand, if he lost this opportunity Fate offered him, he saw nothing before him but a long existence of privation and hardship with a pauper's death to end it.

And as for that girl he had so suddenly begun to think of, what did it matter about her? There was not, he supposed, one chance in a million that he would ever see her again. She would never know anything about it, and yet somehow he remained oddly unwilling to do anything to justify that contempt of him she had seemed to entertain.

"She'll never know," he told himself, "what a fool I am; I shall never see her again."

The dispatch-case with the fortune it contained lay where he had thrown it down, and for a long

time he stood moodily in the hall with his hands in his pockets, hardly moving.

"Oh, well," he said at last, "who cares?"

And this was a sign that he had given up his plans, and that rather than permit a girl of whom he knew nothing, whom he had seen only once and would most likely never see again, the right to think of him with contempt, he was abandoning the fortune that lay ready to his hand.

It was a strange thing that the moment he had reached this decision he became extraordinarily cheerful and gay. He found himself whistling as he went off to get the tea of which all at once he felt the need, and he enjoyed it thoroughly.

"And now," he mused as he poured himself out another cup of tea, "the point is, what am I to do?"

To resolve this question he went into the dining-room, helped himself to a cigar, and as it was a fine evening drew up a comfortable chair to the open window and sat there, smoking and considering, with the dispatch-case that held a fortune lying carelessly on a chair near at hand.

"It's a rummy business altogether," was the remark he made when he had half finished his cigar.

It occurred to him that, strictly speaking, it was probably his duty to go to the police and inform them of all that had happened. But he felt that very likely his story would not be believed;

he was still under the impression that a warrant would be out for his arrest on account of his skirmish with his late skipper and the constable, and his new-found virtue did not go to the extreme of making him wish to deliver himself into the hands of the enemy to undergo possibly a sentence of six months' hard labour. Also, it was possible the result would be still more serious, for if anything had really happened to the unknown Mr. Wentworth, and that gentleman's body were found later on, it seemed to Keith quite likely he might be suspected. No, he decided very firmly that he must keep as far from the police as possible; at any rate, until everything was a great deal clearer than it was just then.

He determined, too, that he would not leave the house at present, but would endeavour to see the end of the strange complications in which he was involved. And a potent though unacknowledged factor in this decision he came to stay where he was for the present, was his hope that perhaps there might come there again that girl whose grave eyes and pale, troubled face had so powerfully impressed him. Nor did he forget that there was some one lurking in the vicinity with whom he felt he had an account to settle.

So he determined to stay on for a while. After all, the house contained, apart from the hidden

treasure of jewels, very many valuables. He would appoint himself caretaker for the time being, and a caretaker was surely entitled to his food and even to an occasional cigar.

As for the treasure of the jewels, he made up his mind to find for them a fresh hiding place. It would not be safe to replace them under the board of the flooring in the boxroom, since, for one thing, that now showed plain traces of having been recently lifted. And the knowledge of where the jewels were, if possessed by him alone, might be a very useful, perhaps a trump, card to play in the future.

Having settled all these points and decided to await developments where he was, Keith busied himself for a little about the house, which he felt a caretaker ought to keep as tidy as possible, and then thought that he would go for a walk in Files Wood and see if there was anything to be seen there, and make himself familiar with the lie of the land.

He locked the house up carefully before he left it, and crossing the garden went into the wood, where for a time he strolled about, apparently aimlessly, but in reality keeping a very sharp lookout indeed.

But he saw nothing and heard nothing, and he was thinking of returning to the house, since now

the shadows lay thick beneath the trees and the darkness was increasing rapidly, when he heard a sound as of some one approaching along the path that here bisected the wood and that he himself had come by on the previous evening.

"It'll be Mr. Morgan again perhaps," he thought, and not wishing just then to meet the garrulous little vicar he stepped behind the nearest tree. "Or perhaps," he added to himself, thinking of Mr. Morgan's stories, "perhaps it is the foul fiend himself coming along."

The next moment the new-comer was in view round a bend of the path, and he saw it was the girl who had visited him the night before asking for her sister, and of whom he had thought so much since.

CHAPTER VII

The Broken Bicycle

Why this should surprise him he did not know, but it did, and he stared in blank bewilderment as she came briskly on, wheeling her bicycle before her. He did not show himself, but stood watching from his place of concealment, and she passed on quickly, so that in a moment or two a turn in the path hid her from him. He gave a little start then and rubbed his eyes as though he had seen a vision and was not sure that it was real, and at once hurried after her.

Soon he caught sight of her again. She did not look round and so she was not aware of his proximity, and as the ground was more open here and the path straight, he was able to keep her in sight without pressing too close upon her, till presently she stopped, mounted her bicycle, and rode on. He had not anticipated this manœuvre, and stood still, not quite sure what to do. Before he had decided she was some distance away and had disappeared amidst the trees.

Evidently her destination was the house, and Keith hurried on after her. It was very quiet here under the trees, and the darkness was gathering fast, but there was still sufficient light for him to see her plainly, riding on ahead at a good pace, though sometimes she would be hidden by a turn of the path or intervening trees and then almost at once come into view again.

Very quiet and peaceful was it in the wood, amidst the trees and the fast falling shades of night. Keith heard nothing, saw nothing; he was aware of no foreboding of evil, but he found himself all at once running his fastest, so that she on her bicycle should not get too far ahead of him and have too long to wait when she arrived at the house and found it locked up and empty.

He could not see her now, for the turnings of the path and the thicker growth of the trees hid her from him as he ran. The silence all around seemed to increase; the stillness grew ominous as though to witness some catastrophe; all nature held breath and was still. The shadows lengthened and lay more thickly; it was as though there were something that they wished to hide.

He ran faster and faster; he had the impression that the utmost haste was necessary; that unless he sped more quickly yet an awful thing might happen in this silent wood, beneath these overhanging

trees, amidst these dark and quiet places where the night was rising in great spreading pools of darkness and stillness. On he flew, and he knew, though he knew not why, that a great cry trembled on his lips, a cry of panic and of horror. He turned a corner of the path, and there beneath a great, far-spreading oak lay a broken bicycle; but of the girl who had ridden it no sign or trace was visible, neither to the right nor to the left, neither in front nor behind.

He stood still, and before him lay the broken bicycle, and all around was heavy gloom and a great silence through which there reached him no faintest sound to tell him what had happened or what her fate had been.

For a moment sheer panic overwhelmed him, so that he could have screamed aloud like a frightened child and set off running and never stopped till he fell exhausted. But by an effort he controlled himself, clenching his fists and holding his breath and shutting his eyes and then opening them again, and at his feet still lay the broken bicycle.

He asked himself dully what could have happened? What had broken the machine, and why was it lying there, and what had become of its rider? And he remembered with sudden extraordinary clearness, with the very tone and accent with which they had been spoken, the words of Mr.

Morgan, to the effect that in this place there had been many mysterious disappearances.

It seemed to him that this was not the least mysterious among them all, and when he looked about him it seemed to him also that this wood was an evil place and the home of some very dark and evil mystery.

He could not have been far away when it happened—whatever had happened. Yet he had heard not a sound, not one sound to break the utter silence of the softly coming night, not a cry of any sort, no echo of any struggle.

Yet she had vanished all in an instant, snatched away as it were into middle air, and her bicycle lay broken at his feet.

At that moment he would not have been surprised had the trees parted and shown some awful and unimaginable apparition and the lost girl in its power.

All at once he found himself running between the trees, this way and that, quartering the ground like an eager hound searching for scent. Backwards and forwards, to and fro, crouching low, sending swift searching glances on every side, he went, and once he found upon the thorns of a bush a piece of torn ribbon and once a little farther on, towards a denser growth of trees and mass of tangled undergrowth, he came upon a little handkerchief, edged

with dainty lace, lying in the middle of small puddle where a fallen branch rotted.

These at least were signs, and he ran on lightly and very swiftly, his quick eyes everywhere at once, every faculty that he possessed strung to the highest pitch and all concentrated on the one task of discovering some sign of the lost girl, and suddenly beneath a tall beech tree he saw something white and huddled lying on the ground. He ran towards it, and as he drew near, from a bush upon his right, there came a sound like nothing he had ever heard before, not human, not animal either, but as it were betwixt the two, and somehow vibrant with hate and fury and obscene disappointment.

The moment that he heard this sound he turned and leaped right at the bush whence it had seemed to come, and as he sprang he saw something—but what he could not tell—slip away and vanish behind a tree, something quick and low and small, crouching near the ground and running quickly. His instinct was to rush in pursuit, but he checked himself and turned and ran back to the prostrate girl, feeling that the first necessary thing above all else was to assure her safety, and that if he let himself be drawn away, for no matter how short a time or distance, she might have vanished before he could come again.

She was quite unconscious when he reached her

side, her face was very pale, her skin cold and clammy to the touch, so that for one dreadful moment he thought that she was dead, till he saw that she was breathing faintly. Her long soft hair had become disarranged and lay about her shoulders in a tangled mass, but so far as he could tell she did not seem to have sustained any injury. For a moment or two he hesitated, but plainly he could not leave her there, and so he stooped and lifted her and carried her away, hardly feeling her weight at all, for she was light and he was strung to the highest pitch of his powers. As he went thus through the trees, walking very quickly, her unconscious form in his arms with her head upon his shoulder and her long loose hair hanging down like a soft and scented cloud, he had again that sensation he had experienced once before in this wood of being watched and followed. And once he heard, or thought he heard, close behind him that same indescribable sound, not human, hardly even animal, he had heard before, charged with anger and hatred and vilest threat.

He walked on quickly, taking no notice, but alert and ready for any attack, and up to the very edge of the wood he still had the idea that he was being followed and watched by something unknown and a little terrible and very vile. But the pursuit, if so it can be called, ceased once he was away from

the trees, and unmolested he carried his unconscious burden across the open space that separated the house from the wood and through the garden to the front door. He had to put her down while he got the door open, and only then was he aware how much he was exhausted. He stood for a moment panting and resting, and then he stooped and lifted her again and carried her within and put her down on the sofa in the drawing-room.

It was nearly dark indoors by now, and the first thing he did was to strike a match and light the lamp that stood in the drawing-room and the other hanging lamp in the hall, and he found their light and the radiance they gave very comforting indeed. Quickly he secured the front door, and then went back to the unconscious girl.

She was still very pale, and her skin still had that cold and clammy feeling that had frightened him so much, but her breathing remained perceptible. Very hurriedly—for he could not free himself from the fear that if he left her even for a moment she might vanish in some mysterious new way—he ran into the kitchen and got some water with which he bathed her temples and sprinkled her face in the hope of restoring her senses. But his efforts were unavailing, and he ceased them soon, fearing to do harm, and stood by her side, wondering what to do and how to get help.

He dared not leave her; no matter how secure he made the house he could not think her safe in it when he remembered the strange and mysterious attack that had been made on him during the night. And he saw no way of summoning assistance. The spot was lonely in the extreme; it was rare for any one to pass even during the day, and so far as he knew there was no other dwelling within miles. It seemed to him all he could do was to wait till morning in the hope that whoever had left the milk and eggs he had found on the sill of the kitchen window would come again on the morrow and would be willing to go for help.

For a little indeed he debated within himself whether he ought to make an effort to carry or convey by some means the unconscious girl to some place where she could have help. But he dismissed the notion as impracticable; it had taxed his strength to the full to get her even the short distance from where he had found her to the house; and besides, he dared not take the risk when he knew that in the night without there lurked some unknown and hostile force ready to take him unawares and at a disadvantage.

There seemed to him nothing for it but to watch and wait till morning, and so he made his patient as comfortable as he could, removing her shoes and loosening her clothing at the throat, and

covering her up warmly with rugs he found upstairs.

He left the lamp burning by her side, and taking an arm-chair, he placed it in the hall on the threshold of the drawing-room and prepared to pass the night there.

Slowly the long hours passed away. When he could sit still no longer he got up and walked about the hall, and every now and again he went to the side of the unconscious girl to see how she was. So far as he could tell no change took place in her condition, and a dreadful fear possessed him that she would never recover, but would pass from life like that, before he could summon help.

It seemed to him that never since the world began could any night have been as long as was this night.

Every second was a torment, every minute was an agony, every hour an eternity of dread and suffering.

But this is written and changes not, that all things come to their appointed end, and so at last, at last, he heard at about half-past six approaching footsteps. They were those of a boy coming with the milk, and Keith hurried at once to meet him and told him there was some one ill in the house, giving him also a note and asking him to hurry

with it to the nearest doctor at his utmost speed. The boy seemed intelligent and to understand and went off at a trot, and Keith returned to the house to wait with what patience he might. But he had three hours more of eternity to endure before at last he heard the glad sound of an approaching motor containing a doctor and the nurse, for whom he had also asked in his note.

The doctor was a brisk, elderly man who seemed very horrified to think his patient had been left so long without attention, and by no means inclined to listen to or accept Keith's explanation that he had not thought it safe to leave her.

"Not safe to leave her in that state, you mean," he said severely. "How did it happen?—a fall?"

Keith told his story briefly, saying that apparently she had been attacked, though by whom he could not say, and the doctor seemed a good deal puzzled and slightly incredulous.

"I don't see who could attack her there," he said. "It can't have been poachers, for there is nothing in that wood to poach, and tramps and so on give it a wide berth. Don't you think it may have been an accidental fall from her bicycle?"

Keith said he was sure not, but the doctor appeared inclined to keep his own opinion.

"There is no sign of any violence except for the

blow on the head," he said, "and that seems very like the result of a fall. Still, I suppose you had better inform the police, Mr.—er——?"

"Wentworth," said Keith after a moment's pause, thinking perhaps it might avoid complications if he adopted the name which seemed to be that of the rightful tenant of the house.

"And——?" continued the doctor, glancing at his patient and at her left hand on which there was no ring.

"On—er—my sister," said Keith hurriedly, realizing that she had to be accounted for, and not knowing what else to say.

The doctor did not make any remark, though he did not look too satisfied. He and the nurse conveyed Keith's newly-adopted relative to the room upstairs and put her to bed there, and after a time the doctor came down again, leaving the nurse in charge. He still seemed a good deal upset that his patient had been left so long without attention, and was evidently inclined to regard Keith with some suspicion. To Keith's relief, however, he did not appear to think her condition very serious.

"It's a case of concussion," he said—"rather a bad one; but I see no reason why she should not pull round. I'll look in again later on today."

He went off then, and presently the nurse he had left came downstairs for something she wanted.

She seemed a pleasant, amiable woman, but not very intelligent, and she was not trained at all. She went back to her patient, and Keith got himself some food of which he was beginning to feel the need, and then sat moodily in the kitchen, asking himself what was going to happen next and wondering what he ought to do.

"I'm in a jolly hole," he thought. "The first thing she'll let out when she comes round is that she isn't my sister, and then there's sure to be trouble. But what the mischief could I say? The doctor was suspicious enough as it was. It only needs the genuine Wentworth to turn up to put the top on the whole show."

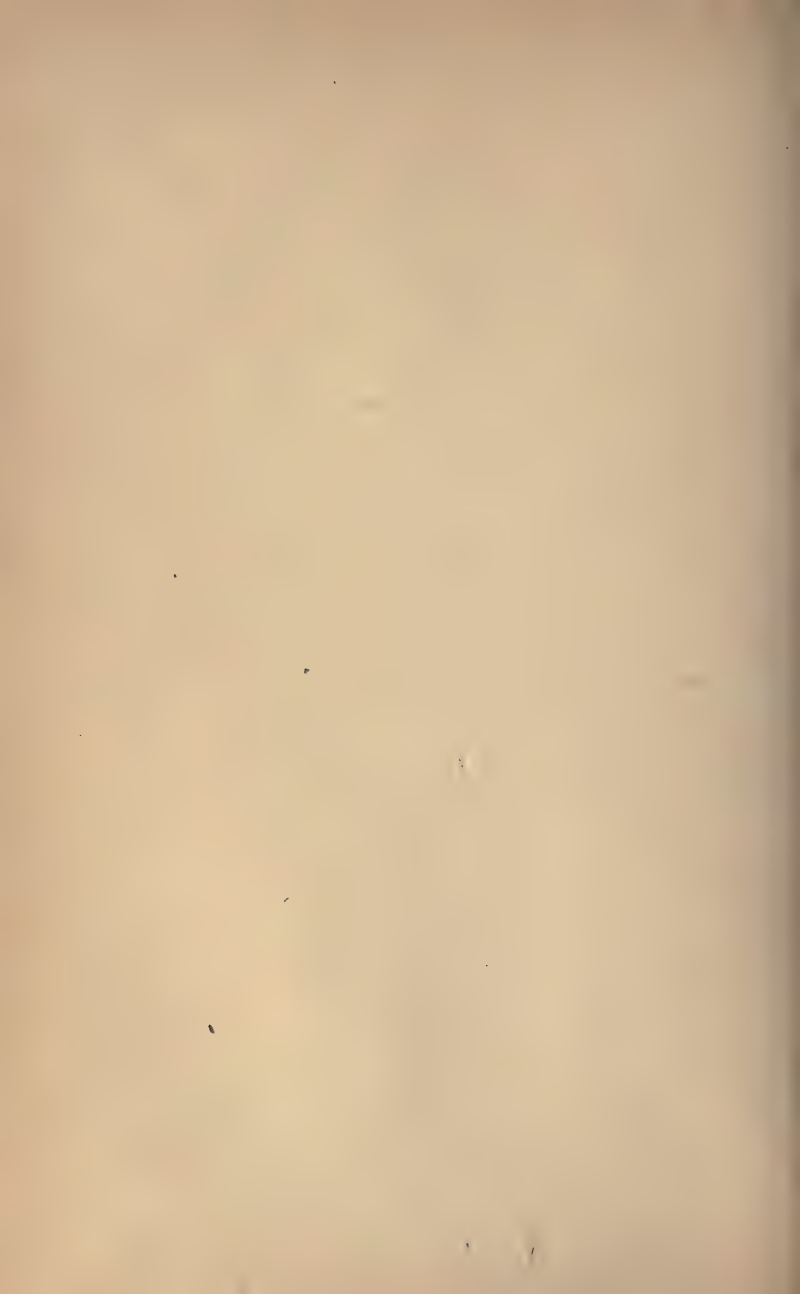
He reflected dismally that so far as he could see there was no possible way out for him from the complications in which he had become involved, and then about one o'clock the nurse came to the head of the stairs and called him.

"She's conscious now," she said, "but she doesn't know anything."

"She doesn't know anything?" repeated Keith, puzzled.

"No," answered the nurse, "she doesn't know what her name is or where she is or anything—her memory's quite gone. The doctor said it might be like that when she came round."

PART TWO



CHAPTER VIII

What the Nurse Saw

The nurse wanted some food warmed, and as she could not leave her patient, who was in a very disturbed and excited state, she said, Keith offered to undertake the task. He did not know much about cooking, but he managed very successfully, and when he had taken what he had prepared upstairs he went and sat in the hall so as to be at hand if anything else was wanted.

It seemed to him this new development made the situation even more complicated than before. If the injured girl had lost her memory, as the nurse declared, she would not be able to explain anything. True, she would also not contradict his claim to be her brother, but what was he to do with a strange girl, of whom he knew nothing and who had lost her memory, to look after, with a store of hidden treasure to protect, and with near at hand some strange lurking hostile creature prowling and ready to make a fresh murderous attack at the

first opportunity? He did not know in the very least what action to take.

And then suppose the missing Mr. Wentworth made his appearance; as presumably he might do at any minute? Keith found himself whistling softly at the thought. Apparently Mr. Wentworth, whoever he might be, had offended or injured the unconscious girl upstairs in some very grave manner to judge from the contempt she had shown towards Keith when taking him for Wentworth, and yet she could not know Wentworth personally, or the mistake she had made would have been impossible. Possibly, then, Wentworth would not recognize her either, or even he might not know anything about her.

Keith gave up trying to find any way out of the extraordinary position in which he found himself. It did not appear to him that he could possibly extricate himself from the situation in which he was entangled, and he decided that there was nothing for it except to wait quietly the course of events, and meanwhile do what he could to help the unfortunate girl thrown so strangely into his care. If she recovered, things would no doubt be clearer.

That much decided, he felt more cheerful, and he was kept fairly busy for the rest of the day by the nurse, who appeared to have many require-

ments both for herself and for her patient, and who expected him to satisfy them all. Fortunately she was able to report her patient as being much calmer now and inclined to sleep.

Late in the afternoon the doctor came back. He was in a great hurry, he explained, as he had two or three very pressing cases on his hands. On the whole he seemed fairly satisfied with his patient's physical condition, but less so with her mental state, which apparently bothered him a good deal.

"Not that loss of memory is an unusual result of bad concussion," he said, "but there are features in this case that are very unusual and that I hardly understand as yet. Miss Wentworth's loss of knowledge of her identity is very complete, but otherwise her faculties do not seem injured, and yet she is in a most unstable and nervous condition without there being anything apparent to account for it. Has she had any serious mental shock lately?"

"She has had a certain private trouble," answered Keith cautiously, thinking of what she had said about her missing sister, "but not any shock exactly that I know of."

The doctor asked one or two more questions, to which Keith replied as best he could, but necessarily vaguely since he knew so little. This vague-

ness and hesitation the doctor evidently felt and resented, for he remarked shortly that he could do little if he did not receive absolute confidence. Keith managed to soothe him to some extent by protestations of the most complete confidence, and the doctor, after repeating some of the instructions he had given the nurse and emphasizing especially that the patient was to be kept quiet and that all excitement of any kind was to be most carefully avoided, hurried off in his car.

Later the nurse came down to say that Miss Wentworth was in a sound sleep, and that she thought she would take the opportunity to get herself some tea. She seemed a very talkative person, and she mentioned casually as she chatted on that she had found the name "Esme" marked on some of the girl's clothing.

"Very pretty name, too," said the nurse, "but, lor', sir, when I said it the poor young lady didn't know it for her own. She might be just a new-born baby, so she might."

Later on still she called Keith and told him his sister wanted to speak to him.

"I told her she ought to rest," she said, "but she won't listen, and the doctor said she wasn't to be allowed to worry herself, which she is doing terrible just now, so I suppose she had better have her own way. But I told her it mustn't be long,

and don't you say no more than you can help, sir."

Keith was very well able to give this undertaking, and he went accordingly into the room where the injured girl was lying. She was still very pale, and her eyes looked strangely bright against the pallor of her countenance, but her appearance was not now of that death-like character which had so alarmed him before. She was very weak still, and when she spoke her voice was no more than a whisper.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, stooping over her.

"I don't know," she murmured; "my head aches . . . are you . . . is it you they say is my brother?"

"Yes," he answered.

"I don't remember you," she said distrustfully. "I don't remember you at all. I thought if you were my brother I would remember you, but I don't."

"You mustn't worry," he answered. "It will all come back to you very soon. You see you've had a fall, and the doctor says that people often forget things when they have had a fall."

"Forget who they are?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered; "it's quite common; nothing to worry about at all. You will remember

everything in time; only you must be patient and keep as quiet and restful as you can. It's only the effect of your fall, you know."

She raised herself a little in the bed and looked at him very intently and searchingly. He thought to himself that hers were the deepest, clearest, most penetrating eyes he had ever seen, and now that they had no longer that expression of hard scorn they had shown towards him before, he saw also that they were very tender and gentle. With a sudden warmth of sympathy and pity he said to her:

"You mustn't worry; it will all come right."

"There was something else," she muttered; "it wasn't only a fall, there was something else."

"Yes, what?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered wearily; "I've forgotten. But it was awful . . . awful."

"Well, you mustn't think about it any more," he repeated. "You are perfectly safe here, you know, and in a few days you will be quite well again."

"If you are my brother, what is your name?" she asked suddenly, and added with a pitiful little gesture: "You see I don't know even that."

"It's Keith," he answered.

"Keith," she repeated, "Keith," and though she was evidently only repeating the name in the hope that it might arouse some dormant recollection, he

thrilled in every pulse of his being to hear it come so softly from her lips.

"I think you had better go now, sir," interrupted the nurse. "Miss Wentworth is not strong enough to talk any longer."

"I am very tired, so tired," she admitted. She put out her hand. "Good-bye—Keith," she said.

"Good-bye, Esme," he answered, and took her hand and held it for a moment in both his, with a warmth that was perhaps a little more than brotherly.

She seemed in some obscure way to feel it so, for she withdrew her hand a little quickly and then, as though repenting her brusqueness, gave him a smile that seemed to him like a divine enchantment. He took the memory of it very clearly with him as he left the room.

Presently the nurse came down to see about the arrangements for the night. She wanted to make up a bed for herself in the room with Esme, and Keith helped her as far as he could to get what was necessary. He promised also to leave his own door open and to be ready to answer any call.

"They do say that there wood," the nurse observed—"but such like stories are all rubbish, that's what I say. I was never one to listen to 'em, either."

She seemed indeed very contemptuous of the

stories that were told about File's Wood and very emphatic in declaring that no one of any sense paid them any attention.

"Though it's all along of such talk," she added, "that the house here was empty so long as it was."

"Oh, was it empty long?" Keith asked.

"Years," answered the nurse. "The gentleman that had it before you disappeared one day, and after that no one would live here. Folks say he went for a walk in the wood and from that hour he was never seen or heard of again, and there's some do say it was the Devil got him, but of course that's just silly talk and I'm sure I don't believe a word of it."

Though she was so sure she did not believe the story, she appeared somewhat inclined to dwell upon it, and she very plainly and thoroughly approved of the careful way in which Keith secured all doors and windows for the night. About eleven she retired, reporting before she did so that her patient was still asleep; and Keith, undressing no more than to remove his coat, lay down on his bed, with the door of his room open so as to be ready for any summons.

He was very tired, but his mind was full of so many and such disturbing thoughts that he felt no inclination to sleep, and he lay awake for hours, perpending. But for all his hard thinking he could

see nothing it was possible for him to do except to wait what should happen next.

"But it's a jolly awkward position," he said to himself, "and if poor little Esme gets her memory back it will be all up at once, or if the Wentworth man comes back at any time. And if the poor child doesn't recover her memory and if no one turns up here—well, what on earth am I to do? I would like to bet a good deal," he mused, "there never was quite such a predicament as this I've got into."

But thinking about it made it no better, and at last from sheer exhaustion he fell asleep and dreamed that Esme smiled at him and called him "Keith" once more in her low sweet voice that changed suddenly into a cry so loud and shrill that he leaped from the bed with it still ringing wildly in his ears. He dashed from the room into the passage. The door of the sick room was open, and by the dim light of the turned-down lamp he could see the nurse, half dressed, lying on the floor in a faint and Esme sitting up in bed looking very frightened and upset.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"I don't know, I don't know," she faltered. "I was asleep and some one screamed, and I woke up and the nurse fell down like that. Oh dear, what can have happened?"

She was trembling violently and was plainly very much alarmed, and Keith told her to lie down again and did his best to soothe her. He was very angry that she had been disturbed and startled in such a manner by the very person put there to shield her against disturbance, and to revive the prostrate nurse he adopted the drastic procedure of pouring a jug half full of water over her. She sat up at once, gasping and shivering.

"Oh, oh," she moaned, "oh, oh."

"What on earth . . . ?" demanded Keith angrily.

"It was the devil," she whispered, "the devil himself—he opened the door and looked straight at me."

"Nonsense," said Keith; "don't talk such rubbish."

"Well, he did," the nurse muttered; "he opened the door and looked at me—I saw him as plain as ever I saw anything."

CHAPTER IX

Esme's Questions

She crawled back to her bed and would say no more, but lay shaking and moaning as if in an extremity of terror. Nor did she even attempt to do anything for the patient of whom she was supposed to be in charge and whom she had so seriously upset. Esme indeed was trembling violently, and seemed on the verge of fresh collapse, but Keith sat beside her, holding her hand and trying to soothe her, and presently she grew calmer.

Towards daybreak she fell into a sound sleep, and Keith, who was thoroughly worn out since this was his second night with little rest, lay down on the floor across the threshold of the room, and almost at once was overtaken by deep slumber.

When he awoke it was broad day. Esme was still sleeping; but the nurse had vanished. On the kitchen table downstairs was a brief ill-written note to say she had gone and did not intend to return, this house being in her opinion, she wrote, no place

for a Christian. A good deal disturbed by her desertion, Keith went back upstairs and found Esme now awake.

"Is that you, Keith?" she said.

"Yes," he said; "it's most awfully awkward, the nurse has cleared off."

"Because of——?" Esme asked.

"Because she's a fool," growled Keith, "because of her nightmare last night; her bad dream has scared her out of her silly mind."

"Was it a dream, do you think?" Esme asked slowly.

"Well, I didn't see anything," answered Keith, "and I don't think there was anything to see, either."

But though he said this his tone lacked conviction, and he felt that Esme was not satisfied.

She suggested that she had better get up to help, but he persuaded her to lie still. He got her some breakfast, managing as best he could, and fortunately it was not long before the doctor appeared and showed himself very angry and disturbed when he heard of the nurse's desertion.

"I never heard of such a thing; it's the last case she'll ever get from me," he fumed. "Disgraceful, absolutely disgraceful."

He spent some time with Esme, and told Keith afterwards that while she was getting on very well

physically, her mental state was still very puzzling and somewhat disturbing.

The chief thing he impressed upon Keith was that she was to be kept quiet, as the effects of the shock she had sustained still remained. Rest and quiet were what she needed, and as soon as her bodily health was completely re-established it was to be hoped that her memory would return.

He went away, promising to obtain another nurse for them, but when he came back late in the afternoon he brought only a young girl from a cottage situated four or five miles away, but also one of the dwellings nearest to them. She was to give what help she could for a few hours during the day, but made it quite plain at once that she would not spend the night there. It was the best arrangement the doctor had been able to make, for strange stories were already in circulation, and no one was at all anxious to have anything to do with the place or willing on any terms whatever to be found anywhere near it after dark.

"Pack of silly fools," growled the doctor, who was in a very bad temper. "I have been telling them what I think of them, but it's no good; they're as obstinate as donkeys. The only thing I can advise you to do is to get a nurse down from London. I could telegraph for one, but even so I doubt if she could get here tonight."

Keith hesitated on the score of expense, for he did not quite see where he was to get the money from to pay for a nurse. The final arrangement arrived at was that the girl the doctor had brought was to come every morning to help, and that she was to be allowed to depart quite early, so as to be able to get to her home well before dark. As for the night Keith and Esme were to manage as best they could, the doctor declaring, however, that he did not suppose Esme would require any attention.

Keith busied himself during the rest of the day making two heavy wooden bars to fit into the slots he placed within Esme's room on each side of the door, so that she could not only lock herself in but could also barricade the door with a security nothing short of a battering ram could affect.

"I don't know what was the matter last night," he said, "and whether that woman really saw something or whether it was just a bad dream she had, but we will make sure that no one can open this door without your knowing."

He made up a bed for himself, too, on the landing just outside her door. He did not occupy it, however, but remained on watch nearly all the night, crouching in a corner by the landing cupboard and ready to spring at once on any intruder who should venture to come prowling there. But

he heard and saw nothing, save for the pattering of heavy rain that fell during the night on the glass of the closed skylight, and towards dawn he lay down on the bed and slept for an hour or two.

The doctor came fairly early again, and professed himself well satisfied with his patient's condition and progress, and during the morning their new handmaid arrived and stayed till afternoon.

For the rest of the day Keith and Esme were alone. Once she began to question him rather closely, but he was able to plead the doctor's orders that she was not to excite herself, and she was too tired and feeling too weak to persist. During the night he again remained on guard while she slept securely behind her barred and locked door, and in the morning she said she had slept well and soundly. Her rest had evidently done her a good deal of good, for she was looking much better and appeared stronger in every way, but Keith's lack of sleep was beginning to tell on him and showed itself in his worn expression and bloodshot eyes. During the afternoon of this day he fell sound asleep on a chair on which he sat down for a moment and only awoke when it was beginning to grow dark to find Esme, fully dressed, sitting opposite to him.

"Poor boy," she said, seeing him open his eyes, "you must have been quite worn out."

"Have I been asleep?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. "I didn't know. What made you get up? The doctor said——"

"I got tired of lying up there," she interrupted, "and he didn't positively say I wasn't to. Besides, I thought perhaps something had happened; it was all so quiet and you didn't answer when I called."

He felt very vexed and annoyed with himself, but had to admit that he was much better for his rest. She continued to question him and managed to make him admit that he had remained on watch the greater part of each night.

"You see," he explained, "if there is any one comes prowling about here at night, I want to know who it is."

"But if you make all the doors and windows fast no one could get in, could they?" she said.

"They were all fast," he answered moodily, "that night the nurse said she saw some one open the door and look at her."

"Well, she couldn't have really," declared Esme, and went on to ask Keith questions about herself he found it very difficult, impossible rather, to answer. He had to make what excuses he could to satisfy her, and he saw her looking at him rather oddly once or twice.

She was still weak, and getting up had tired her

a good deal, so that he was able presently to persuade her to go back to bed. However, it had done her no harm, for in the morning she seemed much better and stronger, and the doctor appeared very pleased with her progress when he arrived. She was so well, he said, that he decided not to call the next day, as he was very busy, and this house was in so lonely and out of the way a spot that it took up a lot of his time to get there. He told Keith that she had made a remarkably good recovery, and that so far as he could see she would soon be all right again. But there was still no sign of any improvement in her memory.

"Try all you can to stimulate it," he said. "Make natural references to the past; any little clue may give her the lost thread. But don't worry her about it or let her worry herself with trying to remember; let it come naturally, with as little conscious effort as possible."

Keith promised to do the best he could, but at the same time, as he knew absolutely nothing about her past life, he did not see how he was to make natural passing references to it during conversation, as the doctor recommended.

The next day, as it happened, their handmaid failed them also, so they were alone all day and had to manage as best they could. Esme, who got

up during the morning, seemed to think this excellent fun, and to Keith the situation would have been perfect beyond all dreams had only his mind been just a little more at ease.

The following morning the missing handmaid's father arrived to claim her wages and to say she was not coming any more. It seemed she had had a fright on the way home; she had seen—or heard—something—or somebody—exactly what, was anything but clear. But anyhow she had been badly frightened and she was not coming again.

“And if I may make so bold as to speak,” added her worthy father with a glance at Esme, “what I say is as this place ain't fit for no one, and you and the lady would be better somewhere else; it's an ill place this and ill things happen.”

He was obviously and so thoroughly in earnest that his words had an odd impressiveness of their own and produced an effect both on Keith and Esme. And indeed Keith would have been very glad to leave the place and go elsewhere had he only had the very least idea in the world where else to go to.

After the old man had taken his departure Esme seemed very quiet and thoughtful. She went into the drawing-room and, sitting down at the piano, played a few notes. It was the first time she had done such a thing, and Keith heard her and came

into the room. She stopped at once and turned towards him.

"Is it not strange," she said, "that I can play the piano and yet cannot remember how or where I learned?"

"Yes," answered Keith, "but you know you must not worry yourself. The doctor always says that the more you worry yourself and fret about it, the longer your memory will be coming back."

"How can one help worrying?" she answered impatiently. "It's silly of him to say I oughtn't to. Suppose he is wrong and it never does come back at all?"

"Oh, but it will," he assured her eagerly; "there can be no doubt of that; of course it will."

"Keith," she said, "what did that man mean by saying that ill things happen here?"

"Oh, that was all rubbish," he answered quickly.

"Keith," she said again, "I think it was an ill thing like that made me lose my memory."

"My dear child," he protested, "you know you only make it much worse by talking about it and worrying."

"How can I help when you won't tell me anything?" she said.

"It is better for it to come back naturally," he answered evasively. "You mustn't worry, that's the main point."

“How can I help,” she exclaimed again, very passionately, “when I don’t know who I am, or why I am here, or why you say you are my brother when I know very well that you are not?”

CHAPTER X

Summer Days

For a moment he could only look at her, so utterly taken aback and surprised did he feel.

"Why do you say that?" he stammered.

"Well, you aren't, are you?" she insisted.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"There, you see," she exclaimed quickly, "I knew it; I knew it all the time; I don't know how; I felt it. Why did you say you were? Tell me everything now; tell me all you know, who I am and why I am here?"

She was growing very excited, and he began to be seriously alarmed lest her agitation should have some ill effect.

"Of course, I will tell you everything I can, if you want me to," he said quickly. "I couldn't very well before. Only you mustn't excite yourself like this. Besides, there isn't very much I do know. I told the doctor you were my sister because I had to account for you somehow, and I said that on the spur of the moment. I didn't know what else to say."

"But tell me about myself," she said, "all about myself, what my name is and where I belong and everything. Oh, if only I could remember!" she cried passionately.

"You are going the very way to stop yourself remembering," he told her severely. "The doctor said you were not to excite yourself in any way whatever, and here you are working yourself into a regular fit. I will tell you all I know, but it isn't much. I was in the wood over there; I was just looking round; it was rather late, nearly dark. I saw you coming along the path, pushing a bicycle before you. There is nothing in that, of course; it is a public path. You went by without seeing me because of some trees, and you got on your bicycle where the ground is a bit more level and rode on. I hurried after you because I thought you might be coming here for some reason, and I found your bicycle lying on the path under a big tree, but no sign of you anywhere. I thought something had happened, and I looked round and found you lying on the ground a little way away. You were unconscious and your head had been hurt, but there was no one near you and nothing to show what had happened. I picked you up and carried you here; there was nothing else to do. When the doctor asked me about you I just said you were my sister to satisfy him. I didn't know what else to

say. Of course I never dreamed you wouldn't be able to remember anything when you recovered, and when I found you had lost your memory I simply hadn't an idea what I ought to do. It made everything awkward and puzzling just when I expected you to clear things up. Finally I let things go as they were. The doctor kept saying you might get your memory back any moment, and I thought I would wait till then. I thought it would be easier then to decide what to do."

She remained sitting for some time with her hands folded in her lap before her, considering gravely what he had said.

"If I was attacked in the wood . . . who attacked me?" she asked at last.

"I don't know," he answered. "I wish I did."

"The same . . ." she asked, shivering a little, "who . . . that the nurse saw?"

"I should think it very likely," he agreed reluctantly.

"It is very strange," she muttered, putting her hand to her forehead. "I have had the feeling all the time that something awful . . . that there was something awful and strange happened sometime, somewhere . . . I can't remember what."

"I oughtn't to have told you," he exclaimed remorsefully. "I didn't mean to, till you were stronger."

"I am very glad you did," she answered. "It is all very, very strange, and dreadful, too, but I am glad I know; it is better than worrying and thinking and wondering who you were and why you pretended to be my brother and what you were doing it for. I am glad you told me, but I am very tired and I think I will go upstairs to bed now." She got to her feet. "But what are we to do?" she asked, lifting her hands suddenly. "What a position to be in."

"The best and sensible thing to do, in fact the only possible thing," he answered, "is simply for us to keep as quiet as we can for a time and for you to rest and not bother about anything. If you get thoroughly better your memory will almost certainly come back. And until it does and we have something to go on, we are pretty helpless. Of course it is always likely that some inquiry will be made. I have been expecting that every minute almost. In the meantime the only thing to do is to take things easily for a couple of weeks or so. You will soon get better and stronger; and besides, we may hear something in some other way before then. But the first thing is for you to get well and strong."

"I will go to bed now," she repeated. "I am so tired."

The night passed quietly, and when the doctor

came in the morning he thought her so much better that he said he would not come again till Saturday.

“I am nearly worked to death,” he said, “and this place takes such a time to get to. If you and Miss Wentworth wanted to be quiet you have certainly come to the right spot, Mr. Wentworth. So I won’t come again till Saturday, but if Miss Wentworth’s memory should return suddenly you had better either send or come to me at once. I don’t expect it will though now till she is thoroughly rested.”

He had encouraged Esme to get up, and almost as soon as he had gone she appeared downstairs. She seemed in a very bright, cheerful mood, declared she felt perfectly well, and announced that she was not going to worry herself about anything, but was going to have a real good rest and quiet time.

Fortunately the weather was fine and sunny, and that day and the next passed for Keith like a dream of delight. He could hardly believe he was the same man who a few days previously, hungry and in rags, weary and despairing, had slouched along the hill at the bottom of the road and then approached this house to beg a crust of bread. Now he was living in it as though it were his own, with none to say him nay or challenge his right, and with him, for friend and companion, a charming

girl who trusted her safety to his protection and whose dominion over him grew more absolute every day. Possibly the very precariousness of his situation made his delight in each passing moment more keen and poignant. Since he knew well that any instant might see him thrown again into the world, outcast and a beggar, separated from Esme beyond all hope, he was all the more resolved to enjoy his good time while it lasted.

Yet he told himself that if trouble came he had one card to play in the fact that he alone now knew where was hidden that great hoard of shining jewellery he had so strangely discovered. He could use that knowledge to make terms for himself, he thought, and to establish his good faith, since but for him he had little doubt it would by now have been found and seized by whatever strange presence it was that haunted this house and these neighbouring woods.

During all this time he never relaxed his precautions, and at night he always slept on the landing at Esme's door, rising many times during the hours of darkness to make sure that all was well. Nor would he either venture himself into the woods or permit Esme, as she wished to do, to make excursions into them.

"All in good time," he said. "I mean to find out what is really there some time, but not yet."

"I think sometimes," Esme confessed, "that I have a feeling some one is watching us from there. I think sometimes I can see the bushes move, but perhaps it is the wind."

Keith had had the same idea, but he said nothing about it and began to talk about something else. Rather to his surprise Esme was proving herself a very capable housewife, and certainly whatever else she had forgotten she remembered perfectly her household skill. She took command of the domestic arrangements quite naturally, turned Keith out of the kitchen altogether, and when he protested that he wanted something to do showed him the garden, which certainly was beginning to need attention.

Their mornings, therefore, were quite busy with Keith gardening and Esme busy about the house, though sometimes, as a great concession, she would allow him to come and help her for a little when the oil stove wanted filling or there was something heavy to be lifted.

In the afternoon they generally sat out on the lawn in deck chairs, talking or reading, or Esme busy with needlework, while Keith treated himself to one of the fast diminishing stock of cigars from the box in the dining-room. After tea she would generally go to the piano and play, and as Keith had a good voice and had had lessons in singing,

she would play an accompaniment for him while he sang, or, more rarely, he would persuade her to sing herself, though she had not a very good voice.

Certainly no one to see them thus, sitting together on the lawn in the afternoons or at the piano during the long light evenings, could have dreamed what was the true state of the case, that one was a homeless, penniless tramp, and that the other did not even know her own name or where she came from, or that neither of them had the very least idea of what was going to happen next.

No one ever came near them. Save for the little boy who brought them their morning's milk, they might have been on a desert island cut off by widest seas from all mankind. It was the rarest event even for any one to pass along the road at the foot of the hill and, except for the doctor's visits, they passed the whole week without even seeing any living creature.

But they had the feeling, though they hardly ever spoke of it, that there was some one very near, some one lurking and watching in the wood, some one waiting there an opportunity that would perhaps present itself before long.

"I am afraid sometimes," Esme confessed one evening with a little shiver.

"No reason to be," Keith told her smilingly. "If there is some one dodging about that wood he

doesn't mean to show himself. He knows better," he added grimly.

It was a fortnight they had mutually agreed they would wait before deciding on any future course of action and in the hope that Esme's memory would return. But of that there was as yet no sign, though bodily and physically she appeared very well. Keith, though he knew he lived over a powder magazine that any accident at any moment might explode, enjoyed every passing moment, and indeed thought to himself that this was as near Paradise as earthly men could hope to get. To him their existence was one long idyll, in the warm summer sunshine. With Esme's gentle companionship, it seemed to him that everything was perfect. He even began to lose his sense of the strangeness and insecurity of their position, and to look upon the house as his own, as though he had a right to be there. That the genuine owner of the place might return at any moment he had almost forgotten; and then one afternoon, when they had been sitting on the lawn and he had come indoors for a few minutes for some reason, leaving Esme sitting alone outside with her needlework, she followed him presently into the house.

"There is a man just come out of the wood," she said quickly; "he says his name is Wentworth; he says he wants to speak to you."

CHAPTER XI

A Bribe

It had come then, it had come at last, the moment so long anticipated, so long dreaded, inevitable always, he supposed, but at last almost forgotten. His time of joy was over; the moment to pay for it had come.

"What is the matter?" Esme asked, looking at him; "aren't you well?"

He heard her voice as though it came from a long way off, but it helped to recall him to himself.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. Put your hand on the table there."

"Why?" she asked wonderingly, but obeyed him, for there was something curiously compelling in his tone. "Why do you look at me like that?" she asked.

She had removed her hand as she spoke and he stooped and put his lips to the place where it had rested and stood upright, and without looking at her walked quickly away with a firm step, as a criminal going to his place of appointed death may

yet walk firmly and with a good presence, through the hall to the garden where it seemed that Mr. Wentworth waited.

"It's Esme I've got to think of," he said to himself; "unless they treat her fairly they shall never know what's become of their jewels."

The stranger was standing in the middle of the lawn, and seeing Keith he came a step or two towards him. He was an unusual-looking man, very tall and very thin, with an impassive, pale, cadaverous face on which the skin seemed stretched as tightly as is the parchment over a drum. His eyes were sunk deeply in his head and were small, but very bright, fierce and eager, as though the life banished from the rest of his death-like countenance had sought refuge there. He was clean shaven, but the growth of his beard was very strong and the hair showing beneath the skin gave his chin and the lower parts of his cheeks a bluish-black appearance. His hair was black, too, and very thick, and his limbs seemed too long for his body and not well fitted to it, so that he had a curiously awkward appearance. As he saw him the thought that flashed instantly into Keith's mind was:

"This isn't the man who used to be here; those clothes upstairs would never have fitted him."

He said aloud:

"Good day; you wished to speak to me?"

He spoke calmly and coolly, for by now he had quite regained his self-possession, and it seemed that his quiet manner slightly disconcerted the other.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I did."

"Won't you sit down?" Keith asked, pointing to one of the deck chairs and at the same time occupying one himself.

"Thank you," the other answered, and seated himself cautiously and a little as if afraid that the chair would break down under him; and as Keith watched his slow and slightly clumsy movements he thought again to himself:

"Nor is this the man who tried to strangle me and who attacked Esme—he hasn't the quickness and activity that fellow must have."

Aloud he said, as still the other did not speak:

"Your name is Wentworth, I understand?"

"The same as your own, is it not?" the stranger asked quickly.

"Quite so," agreed Keith, and added pleasantly: "And yet we are not relatives, I think?"

The other did not answer, but he shot at Keith a sudden look from his sunken sharp little eyes that was full of doubt and menace and fear, as though this remark puzzled and even intimidated him. Like a flash of lightning the idea came to Keith:

"Why, the fellow does not know who I am or

what I am doing here any more than I know who he is."

He felt his confidence greatly increased by this sudden conviction. He lay back in his chair as if quite at his ease, and looked calmly at his visitor, who was still silent and hesitating.

"Yes?" he said, as though inviting him to state the object of his call. "Yes?"

The stranger still did not answer. He sat scowling and doubtful, pressing his great bony hands together, and now and again darting at Keith a quick and questioning look from under his shaggy brows.

"May I ask . . ." began Keith and paused. "I understood you wished to say something to me?"

"I expected to see another Mr. Wentworth," answered the stranger.

"Of course," answered Keith politely; "I am exceedingly sorry for your disappointment."

The stranger lifted his eyes and looked full at Keith, and there was in them a menace and a malignity quite extraordinary. Keith realized to the full that this was a dangerous and perhaps a desperate man, but he smiled lightly as he looked back and waited. All at once the stranger leaned forward and touched Keith on his knee with one of his great bony fingers.

"Where is he?" he asked.

Keith did not answer.

"Where is he?" the other asked again, his manner full now of deep and fierce passion, of a bitter and consuming hatred. A dull flush had crept under the pallor of his dry and tightly drawn skin and he said again: "He isn't here, where is he?"

Keith had an inspiration.

"If you care to leave a message . . ." he said and left the sentence unfinished.

"Then he isn't here?" the stranger asked, flashing a quick look at Keith.

"As I think you said just now," remarked Keith.

"Did I? Perhaps I did," said the other. "Are you a friend of his? Has he left you in charge here?"

"Well, I suppose," mused Keith, "I suppose I may say I am in charge here for the time being. But before I answer any more questions I think I am entitled to ask for the reason of your visit and your object in questioning me. I may as well tell you," he added, "that I do not at present feel very much inclined to prolong this interview."

"You are on his side?" the stranger asked.

"As I say, I do not feel inclined to answer any more questions till I know what they are for."

"Well, let me ask you one more," retorted the stranger. "Are you rich?"

"Not as rich as I should like to be, anyhow," answered Keith.

"Would a thousand pounds be any use to you?" asked the other slowly.

"Are you hinting at a bribe?" asked Keith directly.

"No, a reward for co-operation," answered the stranger.

"I appreciate the distinction," smiled Keith. "Would the amount you mention be paid in money or in—jewellery?"

"You could have it any way you liked—when you had earned it," answered the stranger, looking puzzled.

And Keith thought to himself that he at least knew nothing of the hidden hoard of jewellery the house had contained.

"What should I have to do to earn it?" he asked. "You must excuse my curiosity, but when a perfect stranger drops in and offers one a thousand pounds one naturally wants to know the details."

"You would have . . . to help me," the stranger said.

"Indeed, in an important matter presumably," Keith remarked. "In what way? I like to be precise."

"First of all by telling me where Dick Wentworth is," the stranger said, and he pronounced the

name with a certain accent of hatred and suppressed rage and with a gleam in his small, sunken eyes.

"Sorry, but I am afraid I can't do that," answered Keith, "for the simple reason that I don't know."

"You don't expect me to believe that," said the other roughly. "Or Mrs. Wentworth then, where is she?"

"I don't know that either; haven't the least idea," Keith assured him.

The stranger got angrily to his feet.

"You lie," he said.

Keith rose to his feet, too, and they faced each other.

"No doubt it's purely prejudice," he said lazily, "but there you are, we all have our little fads, and it's one of mine that I don't allow people to use that expression to me. You will apologize therefore—or——"

"Or what?" the other sneered.

"Or there is going to be a bit of a dust up between us," Keith answered.

There was a moment's pause, and the two men eyed each other closely. Keith was powerfully built and exceedingly active, and he had never yet met an adversary to whom he could not render a good account of himself. But he recognized that

he was now faced with a man whose great height and remarkable length of limb were likely to render him no mean adversary. His eyes, too, were those of a fighter, fierce and hot, and Keith, watching them intently so as to be ready for any swift attack, held himself prepared for a struggle that he felt would be no easy one. But on a sudden the other laughed, a harsh, disconcerting laugh that had the remarkable quality of leaving his pale and cadaverous features quite unmoved.

"Oh, all right, I apologize," he said. "After all, you are not the game I am after; you are not my meat. So you refuse me your help; you don't want my thousand pounds I offer?"

"I never said so," answered Keith; "but I can't earn it by answering questions I don't know the answers to."

"Well, if you get to know," said the stranger, "or if you feel you are willing to do some work for good pay, just tie a bit of white rag or a handkerchief, or something like that, to one of those bushes under the trees there. You will soon hear."

"Very likely," answered Keith; "I can quite believe it; but might it not be dangerous?" and as he spoke, watching the other closely, he put his hands to his throat with a gesture as if affecting strangulation.

Not a muscle of the stranger's face changed, but a light flickered in his eyes for a moment and Keith saw he understood.

"No danger at all, I assure you," he answered; "those who are my friends are friends to each other."

"So it is a friend of yours, is it," exclaimed Keith angrily, stepping nearer to him, "who is dodging about over there?"

"I don't know what you mean," retorted the stranger; and all at once, for Keith's looks were very threatening, a revolver showed in his hand. "You had better keep off," he said coldly.

Keith hesitated, tempted to dash in and risk it, for bullets miss often enough. But he thought of Esme most likely watching from the house, and he remembered that he was the only link that existed between her and the world. Again for a moment the two men looked at each other, their eyes fierce and alert, their breathing short and quick, and then all at once the stranger put back his head and uttered his harsh, disconcerting laugh that never seemed to affect his features in the least.

"Come," he said, "don't let's be such fools. What have we to fight about? I dare say you know this is a big business. If you stand in with me, you share. If not, you don't. That's all."

"I was only wondering," said Keith, "if I ought

not to keep you and hand you over to the police."

"The police?" repeated the other and seemed genuinely surprised. "What for? I think this an affair we shall all want to keep away from the police. Good day, and think over what I said. If you feel you want that thousand pounds——"

"I should like to see it, anyhow," retorted Keith with a certain emphasis on the word "see."

"You think I haven't got it?" the stranger asked. "Man," he cried with a sudden note of exultation, "I shall be worth a million before this is over," and with a sudden gesture full of an indescribable exultation and the fiercest energy he turned and walked away with his long, quick, clumsy stride.

CHAPTER XII

Two Days

Keith watched him go till he vanished beneath the shelter of the trees, and the thought came to him that it would be wise to follow and see where he went and if he communicated with whoever or whatever it was of mystery that lurked there. But though Keith made a step to carry out this intention, then he stopped, remembering that he dared not leave Esme alone, even for the shortest time.

It seemed to him that on the whole this interview had only served to make still more obscure the strange and bewildering situation in which he found himself, and what puzzled him most of all was his conviction that his own presence here was equally puzzling and mysterious to his visitor, who yet had not dared to challenge it in any way. Still, Keith was convinced that the man knew something, probably indeed a great deal, concerning these events, and in especial he was sure he knew about the being, whoever or whatever it might be, that lurked and watched and waited in the wood about

the house. It was equally plain, however, that he knew nothing of the existence of that hoard of jewellery, to obtain which Keith felt convinced had been the aim of the attempt made upon his life. Another puzzling point was that while Esme must undoubtedly be linked in some way with the house and its vanished tenants and the mystery that hung about them, and while precisely the same must be true of the stranger who had just gone away, yet he and she apparently knew nothing of each other, since he did not seem to have recognized her, and her memory had been stirred in no way by his coming.

With the feeling then that the darkness and mystery all around were deeper and more puzzling even than before, Keith went back slowly to the house and to the drawing-room, where he found Esme sitting with some needlework in her hand.

She was making little pretence at working, however, and as he entered she looked up very quickly and eagerly, but without speaking. Plainly she was hoping that the stranger's visit had thrown light upon things and perhaps upon her unknown identity, and she seemed greatly excited and disturbed. Sitting down beside her Keith said:

"I don't know what he wanted. I couldn't get anything out of him."

She looked very disappointed.

"But didn't he . . .?" she began and paused. "You were talking a long time," she said.

"I was trying to get something out of him," Keith repeated. "I think he knows something about what's going on in the woods yonder, but he would not say anything. I hinted at going to the police, but he never turned a hair. I am almost sorry I let him go. I wish I had kept him here."

"How do you mean? How could you?" she asked.

"I believe he is up to mischief of some sort; I didn't like the fellow's looks," answered Keith moodily; "and there's lots of room in the cellar."

"Good—gracious!" she exclaimed, staring at him in frank amazement. "You don't mean . . . but you aren't serious?"

"Yes, I am," he answered. "I feel desperate enough, goodness knows, and I am sure he knows something. After he had been in the cellar a bit with nothing to eat or drink he might have grown communicative. Or his friend over there in the wood might have come to ask about him."

She considered this very gravely and with cheeks that had become a little pale. She had laid her needlework down and her hands were clasped tightly together.

"Why do you feel desperate?" she asked gently. When he did not answer she continued:

"You know you have never told me anything: why you are living here all alone, or who was here with you before I came. I don't even know if you are married. I thought you were at first. Some one was here with you before me?"

"No," he answered, "no one at all has been here with me except you, and I am certainly not married," and as he said this he looked up quickly, and their eyes met, till she looked away with a flush rising on her pale cheek. "I hope to be some day," he said and stopped, appalled all at once by his own words as a swift realization of his position and of hers came into his mind.

"Do you?" she remarked coldly and indifferently, taking up her needlework again. "I suppose lots of people have that idea." All at once she sprang to her feet. "Oh, I shall go mad," she cried. "I think I am mad. I must, I must, I must remember. Oh, why can't you find out something about me?"

She sat down as abruptly as she had sprung up, hiding her face in her hands and quivering and trembling from head to foot with the violence of her emotions. He sat quite still, staring moodily in front of him. In truth, he did not know what he could do, considering his own situation was what it was and that he had no right even to the clothes upon his back; and he understood also that for

some time she had realized that there was something strange and unusual about him and his position there. Without looking up she said in accents of intense and bitter reproach:

"I have been so hoping you would tell me and you have never said a word, not a word."

"There is only one thing I can tell you," he answered, deeply stung, and feeling that she had cause for complaint against him, "and that is that you were here once before. You came the night before; you seemed very angry and upset about something—I don't know what; and you asked me where your sister was——"

"My sister! I have a sister!" she cried excitedly, forgetting for the moment her anger with him. "Oh, then there is some one; I'm not all alone; there is some one. What else did I say?"

He told her quickly the story of her first visit to the house, and she was very excited indeed and eagerly interested. It seemed to be a great comfort to her to know that she had spoken of having a sister, for she had apparently conceived a secret fear that she might be as lonely and desolate of all friends and relatives in reality as she was in appearance.

"Where can she be? Who can she be?" she kept repeating. "I was looking for her, that is why I came here?"

"Yes," he answered, "and I think myself that most likely she is the lady whose things are in your bedroom."

"Yes, yes," Esme agreed, "but then you . . . you . . ." she looked at him with doubt and wonder. "This is your house; you must know," she said.

"No, I don't," he answered. "The house isn't mine at all. I am a stranger here; in a way an intruder, I suppose. I can't very well explain; besides, you'll be making yourself ill again. You know the doctor said you were to avoid all excitement for a long time." He came to a sudden determination. "Let us wait two more days," he said. "That is all—no more. I have an idea that something may turn up now. We have had one visitor; perhaps we may have another. If we don't I will tell you everything; at least, unless you have made yourself ill again. But there isn't much I can tell you, you know; practically nothing in fact. Still, you shall know it all, and then we will make up our minds what to do. Perhaps we ought to go to the police and ask them to help us to find your friends. But I didn't want to do that if I could help it."

"Oh, no," she exclaimed, obviously startled by the idea; "oh, no, I wouldn't like to do that," and though a little reluctantly she agreed to wait the two days that he suggested.

For his part he did not really think it very likely that anything would occur to make the situation plainer in these two days, and at bottom he desired the delay simply because he wished for a respite before being obliged to leave for ever this strange and precarious garden of delight into which he had so wonderfully strayed. Soon, he knew, it must be over, and he was very sure that as soon as they applied to the police authorities for help his story would have to be told and he would find himself arrested.

But now that he had obtained the eight and forty hours he had asked for he set himself to forget the doubts and mysteries that surrounded them, and to enjoy every passing moment.

At first Esme was irresponsive and inclined to brood, but before long she yielded to the infection of his mood and they became like two careless, happy children, living only in each hour as it came and only for the enjoyment to be got from it.

For the first time they left the vicinity of the house and made a long excursion into the bare downland that lay behind, beyond the wood. They took sandwiches with them and stayed out a long time, enjoying to the full what they both felt to be something of a release.

Thereby also they missed the doctor, who came a little out of his time and left a somewhat hurried

and slightly ill-tempered note to say that he had been during their absence.

The weather was perfect, fine and warm and yet not too hot, and for Keith at least the hours slipped by as in a golden dream. Esme, too, strove hard to put all anxious care behind her and to live only in the present, telling herself that this was her best hope of regaining her memory. On the whole she was successful, and their content and happiness during this time was very great, and made all the more poignant, with a trembling edge of delight that was as keen as pain—for Keith, by his certain knowledge that the end was coming quickly; for Esme, by the background of her doubts and terrors and her great fear that she would never recover her sense of identity or know who she was.

Neither of them ever forgot those two days, the sunny hours in the garden, their long walks, the meals that they prepared together, their washings up in the scullery, the time when Esme forgot to put the tea in the pot so that nothing came but hot water when she tried to pour out, the morning when she left him for a moment with the bacon and he managed to char it into unrecognizable cinders, or that special hour with a flavour all its own when he and she picked raspberries together in the garden and her mood was very soft and gentle.

It was when they had eaten as much of the rich

fruit as they wished that they went back to where their chairs were standing on the lawn. There she sat down and he lay on the grass at her feet and began abruptly, and with no word of preparation, to tell her his story.

He told of his birth and upbringing and of his school days that had been no different from those of any other boy belonging to the fortunate classes. He told her of his father's sudden death that had left him penniless and cut short abruptly his university career. He told her of his life as a clerk and of how he had loathed his office, of his brief experience on the tramp steamer, of his encounter with his skipper and the policeman, and of how he supposed that a warrant was out for his arrest therefor. He described his decision to tramp back to London, the bitter mood of recklessness that had grown upon him, how he had found this house derelict, and how it had seemed to him a first-class joke to take advantage of the food and shelter it offered, and he told her of his experiences in it.

"I thought I would appoint myself caretaker," he said. "I thought it rather a lark at first, and after the attempt to murder me—I am jolly sure murder was meant—and after I found all that jewellery, I made up my mind to stay on and see the thing through. It was plain there was something queer about it all, and I thought something would be sure

to happen soon. But what happened was—you—and when you couldn't remember things I was all up a tree again. But now I think we must come to some decision; we can't stop here for ever. Grub is beginning to run low for one thing. For my own part I can't see what else to do except to go to the police and make a clean breast of the whole thing and see what they say. Shall I?"

CHAPTER XIII

Their Decision

After a time she said:

"But they would put you in prison because of your fighting your captain?"

"I suppose so," he agreed.

"It was very wrong of you to behave like that," she said with great severity, "and silly, too, and I think you ought to be very ashamed."

"Well, I'm not," he answered sulkily. "If any one tries to do me, I'm jolly well going to punch his head if I get the chance."

"Yes, that's all you care about," she complained; "you never think of anything else. If there's anything you don't like your only idea is to fly in a rage and hit it as if . . . as if . . . as though there was nothing else in the world but knocking people about and banging them and being brutal."

"Oh, I know you think I'm a brute," he said, getting to his feet in a great temper, "and so I am, I dare say. It is very good of you to be so plain-

spoken, and we'll go straight to the police, and they'll quite agree with you, I'm sure."

"Now you're just being silly," she answered in a tone nearly as angry as his own. "Please sit down and try to talk sensibly."

He stood with his hands in his pockets, glowering at her.

"I don't see why you want to slang me so," he complained. "All this isn't so jolly easy for me."

"Well, and is it easy for me?" she asked heatedly, "but of course you never think of that. You just get into a temper and go very red and stand there and won't listen to a word I say."

"Good . . . gracious," he gasped, fairly overwhelmed by the monstrous injustice of this last accusation, and then she took out her pocket handkerchief and his overthrow was absolute and complete.

"Oh, I say," he pleaded, "don't do that."

"I think," she sniffed, "I think you're awfully unkind."

"I didn't mean to be," he protested, not daring to rebut her charge more directly. "I'm awfully sorry," he muttered.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed," he declared earnestly.

"You won't again?" she demanded.

"Oh, no," he promised, though what he wasn't

to do again he hadn't the least idea, but she seemed satisfied and permitted him to catch the faintest flicker of a smile and then held out her hand.

He held it for a moment and wondered if he dared kiss it, and she knew well what was in his mind and hoped he would and was all ready to snatch it away at the first sign of such an attempt and to administer to him a sharp rebuke therefor. But his daring did not run to such extremes, and she, seeing how afraid he was, wondered greatly and was afraid herself, not understanding, so that between them there was a silence, till on her side fear rose to something like a panic, and all at once, in a voice unsteady and quivering, she said:

"Well, we must decide what we must do." She added gravely, as with a new insight into their situation: "I think we are the two most alone people in the world."

"I think we must get help somehow," he said slowly. "The police might be able——"

"No," she interrupted, very emphatically, "we mustn't do anything like that; we mustn't go to them till we know more. You say I said I was looking for my sister when I came here before, and that I seemed very upset . . . well, I think most likely I should have gone to the police then unless there had been some reason why I shouldn't. We must know more before we do anything of that sort.

We might do a lot of harm; we are so much in the dark; we must be careful. And then, if they did put you in prison . . . I should be more alone than ever. I should have nobody at all."

His heart leaped when he heard her say this and he was silent, though she had hoped he would make an answer. Presently he remarked:

"We can't go on living here."

"No," she agreed. "I've been thinking . . ."

But what she had been thinking she did not say, and he continued presently:

"I've been wondering if I could make a thorough search of the wood and find out what there really is there. We might get to know something that way. Only I daren't leave you alone, you see. You wouldn't be safe even in the house."

"I could go somewhere else," she said. "Suppose we leave here and I get a room somewhere, in that village we came across yesterday. And then while I stayed there if you came back . . . there wouldn't be any danger, would there?"

"Not to me," answered Keith grimly. "Yes, that's a good idea; only a room would have to be paid for, and I've got no money."

"I have a little," she said. "The nurse found it when she was undressing me; it would be enough for a few days."

"If we leave here," he said presently and a little

awkwardly, "I should have to change back to my own rags. I couldn't go off in things that aren't mine."

They talked a little more and agreed that she was to get a room in the village a few miles distant they had come upon during one of their long walks, and that while she remained there he was to return and do his best to solve the mystery of the wood that would, they hoped, helped to solve the greater mystery that seemed to surround so impenetrably this house where they were living.

She went indoors to make her few and simple preparations, and he found the clothing he had had on when first he came to this strange place and changed for it the well-cut suit of good tweed he had worn lately. Very nervous, and wondering very much what Esme would think of him, he returned to the lawn and waited there till she emerged from the house in her trim cycling suit with loose jacket and a short skirt that displayed her small feet and slim, well shaped ankles. He had on now a woollen jersey that was anything but clean, trousers that had been mended in more places than one, and clumsy, badly worn boots. He was bare-headed, too, for his cap had seemed to him so filthy that he had thrown it away, and she thought that in this rough working attire he showed to better advantage than ever she had seen him before. He

looked vigorous and capable, his form athletic, his face frank and keen, his eyes very clear, bright and steady. But now he was shaved and washed and tidy. Had she seen him in that dress covered with dust from the road and with three days' growth of stubble on cheeks that had not been washed for nearly as long, her impression might have been different.

"Well?" he said, with a little nervous laugh.

"I like you better now," she said, holding out her hand; "you are really you now."

He had mended her bicycle as best he could, though very imperfectly, and they had decided that when she reached the village they were bound for she was to say that she was on a bicycle tour, that she had had a fall and damaged her machine and shaken herself, and that she wanted to rest for a day or two.

They started on their expedition at once, for there was no time to lose, and at the end of nearly two hours' sharp walking across the bare and lonely moors—during the whole of the two hours they passed no house and saw no sign of human presence—they reached the little village that was their destination. There they parted, and Esme went on down the road, while he lay by the wayside and waited till he saw that she had reached the village. He saw her go into one of the houses, probably

the village shop, though of that he could not be certain, and then come out again after an interval in the company of a woman and go across to a cottage near by. There it seemed she stayed, for she did not appear again, and satisfied that she had found shelter, he rose and tramped back again across the downs that now seemed to him lonely and desolate indeed.

He had laid his plans in consultation with Esme, and they had decided that he was to wait till dark and then slip through the wood as quietly and secretly as he could to the house. If they had been watched and their departure noted, as they believed would be the case, the unknown from the wood might actually be in the house when Keith arrived back and so be easily secured. If not, Keith meant to lie hidden in some favourable spot and wait his opportunity to take the unknown by surprise. And he was very firmly determined that whoever it was had made of these woods hiding place he would discover him somehow and force from him a full explanation of his object in so doing.

When he was near the wood Keith lay down and waited till it was dark, and then in the quiet night he rose and very silently and cautiously, treading so that he should not be heard, stooping down that his tall figure might not betray him against the sky,

he came presently to the trees and vanished in the darkness in their midst.

His progress was very slow, for he had to be careful of every step, for fear some slip should betray him, and very often he paused and listened intently, or stooping down, and with his eyes close to the ground, he peered intently into the darkness to see if there were anything that moved. But he saw nothing, heard nothing, and so with infinite caution he made his way through the night, under the trees, till he had gone three-fourths of the way through the wood and had come to a part where the undergrowth was very dense and the trees thick overhead.

The darkness here was intense, the silence complete. Even the faint and distant rustlings that sometimes had told him of little wild things slipping away before him were not audible here, and the very breeze that hitherto had sometimes stirred the branches of the trees did not seem to penetrate so far. He stood still, and there came to him a very strong conviction that he was no longer alone, but that some one or something was very close at hand, something strange and evil, watching him intently. So strong was this idea that he stooped a little and waited, expecting to be attacked, and he thought he saw something in the darkness close

at his right hand. But when he put out his hand it touched only a tree trunk, and when he listened he heard nothing. For a long time he waited so, and still that impression remained that he was not alone. At last on his hands and knees he began to crawl forward, and when he did so he was sure that he heard a movement on his left.

But what it was he could not tell, and when he waited and listened he could hear nothing, nothing save the beating of his heart, for he was afraid.

Fear had come upon him in the darkness and the silence, and he wrestled against it with all his strength. Again and again he was on the point of springing to his feet and running madly away, never to return; again and again he fought down the impulse, and ever it came back once more. Yet he did not know what it was he feared; it was the kind of shrinking terror a little child may have in the dark; it was as though memory of all the horrors our forefathers have suffered in dark woods came flooding back into his soul and overbore it. And as he lay and sweated from every pore and shook and was afraid, he heard some one laugh a little way away, and at once all his fear departed and left him utterly.

The laugh had been low and bestial and very horrid, but at least it was something real, tangible, human perhaps, something familiar and known.

He lay quiet and listened; and when it was not repeated he got to his feet and went on cautiously and carefully, but taking less elaborate precaution than he had done before. For now he was persuaded his presence there was known.

All at once he came to the edge of the wood before he was aware; and stepping from under the trees he felt the fresh night breeze upon his brow and found the surrounding darkness less intense. Over his head, too, shone now the blessed stars, and the young moon rode high towards the west. And in front of him was the house that he and Esme had left carefully locked up, with every door and window shuttered and barred and bolted, but that now was a blaze of light from roof to ground, with every door and window wide open to the night.

CHAPTER XIV

New-comers

He remained for some time in the shadow by the fringe of the wood, crouching down and watching and asking himself who it could be that had arrived during his absence. One thing at least was clear, that the new-comers did not wish to keep their presence secret, for there was not a window where lights did not show brightly, and in the dark night on the dark hill-side the place showed up like a beacon. But, in spite of all this illumination, there was no other sign of occupation, no sound of any sort, no figures showing at the lighted windows or passing in or out at the doors. Solitary and quiet the house shone against the surrounding darkness as before it had hidden in the night, and seemed no less aloof, no less impenetrably secret.

Very slowly, very cautiously, Keith crept forward till he came to the hedge surrounding the garden. He knew now where there was a gap in this hedge a little farther along, and he found it and crept through and lay in the shelter of the hedge on its inner side.

From every window, and from the open door, the light poured out in beams that fell across the lawn and garden in long streams of bright illumination, but in between these rays the night still remained intense and black. For a few minutes Keith waited, but all was very quiet; no sound came from the house, no one appeared to move within it. It seemed as silent and deserted now in its glowing illumination as ever it had done before, and along the dark patches that lay between the rays coming from each window Keith made his way slowly up to it.

The first window he came to was that of the kitchen, and very cautiously he drew near and peeped through. All within appeared to him to be exactly as when he and Esme had departed, except for the fact that the lamp on the table was now alight and burning brightly. But nothing else seemed to have been touched; he remembered two knives lying on the table that he had put down there that morning, and the plates and cups were still on the dresser as they had left them after washing up.

For a long time he waited there, watching and listening, and hearing and seeing nothing. He drew away at last and went round to the front and looked in at the drawing-room window. There, too, all was as it had been when they had gone, ex-

cept that the tall lamp near the piano was lighted and burning brightly. Nothing in the room seemed to have been touched. The big arm-chair stood where he had pushed it back on rising from it. Esme's music was still open on the piano. It was as though whoever had been there had been content to light the lamps and depart again, leaving them burning, and this seemed to Keith a strange and even terrifying thing.

He wondered whether to enter the house and examine it and extinguish these lamps that for no apparent reason flooded every room with their useless and haunting light. He almost decided to do so, and he went on a little and saw through the open door into the empty hall, where the big swinging lamp glowed brightly. He went on farther to the dining-room windows, and when he looked through them he saw that there was within, seated at the table, a tall handsome man of about his own size and age, with a glass in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other, and drinking the raw spirit with a sort of sullen and desperate resolution.

The light from the lamp shone full upon him and showed his regular, well-formed features of almost feminine delicacy and beauty, his soft curly hair and drooping silken moustache, and his pale and desperate expression. He scarcely moved while Keith watched him; he never once looked up; but

with his eyes fixed moodily on the table and his hands clasping bottle and glass he, like an automaton recently set going, poured out more spirit and drank it off and lapsed again instantly into his former condition of immobility.

Of all the strange sights that he had seen of late, this seemed to Keith the strangest. Who could he be who, having come to this remote and secret place, and having lighted every lamp in it so that it blazed afar like a beacon, now sat in the night made like day and seemed resolved in sullen despair to drink himself into insensibility?

While Keith thus in the night without watched and wondered, and while within the lighted room the stranger with his dreadful and mechanic regularity poured whisky down his throat, there became audible all at once another sound, that of a soft and light tread in the hall without. The door handle turned and Keith drew back a little, afraid all at once, for there came rushing back into his mind a memory of how the woman nursing Esme had declared that the door had opened and the Devil himself peeped in at her.

And it seemed to him that this spectacle of the solitary and silent stranger drinking in gloom and despair through the night was one a fiend might well wish to witness.

But when the door had opened there came in,

doubtfully and with hesitation, a very tall and lovely woman with a pale oval face showing features of classic regularity and a form of almost perfect grace. She was very dark, with magnificent masses of dark hair coiled about her head and dark, handsome eyes, and at present she seemed in great alarm and distress, for her breath was coming and going in great gasps, her hands shook visibly, her whole appearance was of terror and great fear.

The man seated at the table either did not hear her entrance or would not heed it, for he did not look up when she entered, and once more, with his odd lifeless monotony of gesture, he poured out more of the whisky and drank it off and put down the empty glass. He still never glanced at the window, and she came slowly up to the table and leaned on it with both hands and looked at him. Keith was not sure but he thought she made an effort to speak, for she moistened her lips with her tongue once or twice. But apparently no sound came, and the man, though he must have been aware of her presence, did not look up.

Twice more the man, in the same mechanical and monotonous way, as though he had set himself the completion of a dull and boring but necessary task, poured out and drank off more of the raw spirit while the woman remained leaning on the

table with both hands and watching him from tragic eyes. To the hidden observer without the scene was one of extraordinary and dramatic interest, and yet what it would mean, who these two persons could be, and why they should be in such apparent terror and despair, for what reason they had illumined the house so brightly only, as it seemed, that the man might drink himself into insensibility while the woman looked hopelessly on, Keith could not imagine for the life of him.

Once the woman moved slightly and made what seemed a timid attempt to take away the bottle of whisky. But the man, without speaking, clenched his fist threateningly and gave her such a glare of rage that she drew back hastily and made no further effort to interfere. An arm-chair was near the fireplace, and she sat down in it and watched, while he drank again, monotonously as before but perhaps a little more quickly.

At last, without any warning or apparent change, he rolled off his chair, and fell on the floor under the table, totally intoxicated. The woman rose to her feet and stood with clasped hands looking down at him. The light from the lamp shone full upon her pale, exquisite features, and Keith saw that there was on them an expression of the uttermost despair. He wondered whether he ought to make his presence known and offer help. But while he

hesitated she moved suddenly and came to the window and, without noticing him where he stood in the shadow, drew the shutters to and barred and bolted them. He moved away, and he heard her in succession close and lock the front door, bar the shutters of the other windows, and then he saw that she put out all the lights. One only remained, that in the bedroom above, for there a gleam still penetrated through a crack of the shutters.

To Keith the rapidity and completeness with which she made the house secure the moment that her companion had completed his task of intoxicating himself appeared as strange as her previous silence and immobility. He felt very tired and a little cold, though the night was warm enough. He did not know in the least what to do, and he went and sat down under the hedge of the garden. It was late, long past midnight, but the gleam of the solitary lamp in the bedroom upstairs still remained, and he watched it for some time, wondering what the scene he had just witnessed could mean and thinking of the position of the woman alone in so remote a place with, for sole companion, a man hopelessly drunk. He could not help asking himself what she knew of the mysteries and dangers that seemed to lurk about this place, and he wondered if she had been so swift and careful to make every door and window secure because she, too,

was aware of the brooding and evil presence haunting the woods around.

And was she likely to be this night in such peril as for instance he had been when he had been awakened by the pressure of murderous fingers upon his throat?

He wondered again whether to knock at the door and offer help, but he reflected that such an offer at such an hour from a total stranger would not be likely to appear very reassuring; and after he had waited for a time and seen and heard nothing, and when at last the light in the window above disappeared, he made up his mind to go back to the wood and find some shelter there under the trees where he could rest for a few hours.

He went very slowly and cautiously, gliding like a shadow through the night and often pausing and dropping on his hands and knees to listen and peer around lest there should be any following or watching him. But so far as he could tell he was quite alone and no other living creature was anywhere near.

Satisfied that he had at last secured the advantage of concealment from whoever or whatever it was that had followed him so persistently before, he found for himself a comfortable and well-sheltered spot under some close-growing bush. The branches and leaves overhead were so thick as to

give a protection almost like that of a roof, and the mould beneath was soft to lie on and quite dry. The position, too, was favourable, for in front the ground was open and level, and it was not far from the house whose dark mass he could faintly discern against the sky. He decided that first thing in the morning he would return there and see what he could find out, and he was on the very point of falling off to sleep when he heard a low voice calling him from a little distance.

“Keith,” it said, “Keith,” and then again with an accent of haste and pleading: “Keith! Keith! Keith!”

PART THREE

CHAPTER XV

Captured

To Keith this small voice that out of the wood and the night called to him by name seemed at first so incredible and unreal that he hardly believed he really heard it. But when it came again, low, persistent, compelling, he felt that he must answer it, and he had the idea that it came from no earthly source.

For what human creature could there be that knew his name and could be present in that wood that night to call him thus by his name?

He felt the flesh creep as it were upon his bones, the hair bristle on the scalp of his head.

"Yes," he answered, "yes," and held his breath in utter fear of what awful answer that might be.

"Keith," the low voice called again, "Keith."

This time he did not answer, but as though impelled by a force he could not resist he began to move in the direction whence the mysterious summons seemed to come.

It still called him as he went, till he reached a

spot where a great oak grew, and all at once from under it a bright light flashed and shone upon him for an instant and vanished, and the voice he had heard before said, a trifle more loudly this time:

"So it is you, you again."

The extremity of superstitious terror that Keith had endured fled instantly, for now the voice sounded human and even dimly familiar, and the sudden light he recognized for that of an electric torch flashed on and off again. But he was still a little shaken and very puzzled, for he did not know who this could be who was aware of his name and called him by it so oddly, and he said in a voice that was not quite so steady as usual:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want to know what you are doing here," the other answered, and this time Keith thought there was something in the tone and rough manner of speaking that he recognized.

"I think I could ask you that," he observed.

"I asked first," the other said, "and I think you had better answer me. You are playing a dangerous game, my man, you know."

"Am I?" said Keith.

He moved a step or two forward to the great oak against whose trunk he leaned, thinking that it might be as well to have a certain shelter for his back. He noticed that just over his head was a

huge branch with an enormous lump or swelling of some sort on it, and he could just discern the dim and shadowy form of his interlocutor at a short distance.

"Playing a dangerous game, am I?" he repeated. "Let me see, I think you came up to the house the other afternoon, didn't you? You were rather liberal with your offers, if I remember rightly. And you said your name was Wentworth, didn't you?"

The other did not answer, but Keith was certain now that he was right, and that this stranger of the wood was identical with his visitor of a few days previously.

"An unexpected pleasure to meet you again," Keith continued after a short silence and in a brisk and cheerful tone, for it was an immense relief to him that his recent terror had so small and ordinary a cause. It occurred to him that possibly everything else in this affair that seemed so mysterious and daunting might have an equally simple explanation, and he went on: "May I ask why you were amusing yourself by calling my name like that?"

"For a reason you may discover for yourself," answered the stranger.

Keith made no reply to this, for he supposed the reason to be that the stranger had wished to play upon his nerves—and it annoyed him to know that the trick had not been entirely without success.

"Well, here I am," he said. "What do you want?"

"I want——" began the other, and then paused, and suddenly and with a fierce and passionate emphasis cried out: "I want to know who you are and what you are after and why you are always hanging about here? I want to know what business all this is of yours? I want to know what you are meddling for? Why don't you keep out of what doesn't concern you?"

"Ah," said Keith, thinking that on the whole as good an answer as he could make.

"You are running yourself into a good deal of danger, I may tell you," the stranger said angrily and loudly.

"Perhaps you are doing the same," Keith answered, and judged by the silence that ensued that his retort had been effective.

"At any rate," the stranger said after a long pause, "I know what I am doing and I know what I want and I know what Dick Wentworth is doing and what he wants. What I want to know is, where you come in?"

"Ah," said Keith, still of the opinion that that was the best of all the answers he could make.

"Oh, you needn't say anything if you don't want to," said the stranger sullenly. "You were keeping watch, I suppose, weren't you?"

Keith yawned audibly, but made no other reply.

"You mean you are on his side, do you?" the stranger said in a tone more restrained but also with even more of deadly and fierce anger in it. "Well, perhaps you will be sorry for that before you have finished. Look here now. I know a good deal, more perhaps than you realize. I know, for instance, who has been here with you for some days."

"Do you, though?" exclaimed Keith, startled by this sudden and unexpected reference to Esme.

"Yes, I do. She came with some message or with instructions for you, I suppose, since you are evidently standing in with Dick. And I know you and she went off together today for some reason and I know what disguise you adopted."

"Oh, my disguise? yes," said Keith, amused by this reference to his return to his own clothing.

"I know a good deal more than you think, you see," the stranger insisted.

"You do, indeed," agreed Keith, "but you don't know . . ."

"What?"

"Everything," answered Keith, thinking that a safe remark and true of most people under most circumstances. "And I confess," he went on airily, "that there are some things I don't quite understand myself. Now, you made me an offer once.

I'll make you one this time. You tell me your side of the story, tell it me fully and frankly from the very beginning and perhaps—I don't say for certain but perhaps—we may be able to come to a better understanding."

The other did not answer for a moment or two, and Keith's heart beat high with the hope that by this subterfuge he was about to learn the truth concerning these dark matters in which he found himself so mysteriously involved. But when the stranger spoke it was to utter a vigorous refusal.

"No," he said, "no, I don't understand you. I don't know what your game is. I think you have a game of your own on. I don't know where you come in at all; you are a bit too mysterious for my liking."

"Am I, though?" said Keith, thinking that on the whole it was agreeable and rather encouraging to know that all the mystery was not experienced by himself alone.

"I made you a straight offer the other day," the stranger continued. "You didn't accept it. Good thing for me you didn't, for I know now where Dick and his wife are, and I have made my arrangements accordingly."

"Yes," said Keith, "have you?"

"I have, and I don't think you will be able to help them much now, if that is what you are trying

to do. My telegram went off tonight. Perhaps you can guess who it was to?"

"Perhaps I can," agreed Keith, though instead there was no subject on earth concerning which he felt he was less likely to guess correctly.

"Then you must see that the game is practically in my hands at last," the stranger continued, a hurried and fierce excitement in his tones. "I know exactly what will happen and exactly what to do . . . and I win. You realize that?"

"I realize that that is your opinion," answered Keith.

"You realize, too, that I can't run the risk of having all my plans upset by you," the other continued. "You have been a puzzle to me all along and worry. I tell you so frankly. I don't know where you come in. I don't know what your object is. You seem to be trying to help Dick, and yet I can't make out that you and he have ever been in communication. Anyhow, I'm taking no risks."

"No?" said Keith.

"No, and for the last time I ask you to tell me frankly what you are in this for and who you are and what you want. I don't want any trouble that can be avoided; if you are frank with me we might very easily come to some arrangement. This is a big business, and I'm willing to be reasonable. It will be wise for you to be open with me."

"So I will," said Keith. "I suppose it is common ground that you are interested in Dick Wentworth?"

"Oh, very," flashed the other with such an intensity of hate and menace in his voice as made Keith feel that Dick Wentworth, whoever he might be, presumably the solitary drinker he had seen that night, went in no small or ordinary peril. "Yes, very interested."

"And you know," Keith continued, speaking at a venture, "that Dick Wentworth and his wife are at this moment in the house over there?"

"Well?"

"Well, my idea," continued Keith, "is that you and he and I should all have a good talk tomorrow and try to get to the bottom of all this and see if we can't hit on some settlement. What do you say?"

"I suppose that is meant to be funny," snarled the stranger, "and I can tell you I'm not fond of jokes."

"I am quite serious," answered Keith, though with a feeling that his suggestion had not been a very happy one.

"Do you know what I'm beginning to think?" asked the stranger presently.

"What?"

"Why, that you know absolutely nothing about

the whole business, and are just trying to shove in to see what you can make for yourself."

"Oh, you think that, do you?" said Keith, more than a little disconcerted by a guess that ran so very near the truth.

"Yes, and I tell you again that is a dangerous game to play, very dangerous, very dangerous indeed. In fact . . ."

He broke off to whistle suddenly and shrilly; and at the same instant that protuberance Keith had noticed on the branch above his head, and had taken for some natural swelling of the wood, detached itself and fell straight upon him, alighting heavily and with force upon his back and shoulders.

Under the weight and the unexpectedness of the impact he went crashing to the ground, with that which had fallen upon him clinging to his shoulders. He tried to struggle, but a swift and fierce blow on the side of his head shook him into unconsciousness; and when he began to recover his senses it was to find himself lying on his back, his hands held behind him, his arms pressed close to his side by cords drawn tightly round and about his body. He was a prisoner and utterly helpless, for he could hardly move a muscle of his body, and as he lay and blinked bewilderedly—for it had all happened so swiftly he hardly realized his position—at the stars above, he heard the stranger's voice ask:

"Have you got him safe?"

A kind of inarticulate grunt sounded in answer and seemed to be accepted as an affirmative.

"Good," the voice came again; "the fool has only himself to thank. I didn't want any trouble; it only means more risk. But he would have it and he might be dangerous now. Well, you know what to do?"

Again there sounded that inarticulate and bestial grunt that seemed to come from no human throat and yet was full of understanding—and of menace.

"Good night, then," said the stranger. "And good night, Mr. Keith, in case we never meet again."

He laughed softly, and Keith could still hear him laughing softly and wickedly to himself as his footsteps died away into the quiet night.

For a moment or two Keith lay still, and then he tried to struggle, but his bonds held him straitly and he could not. He opened his mouth to cry aloud for help, but at once an enormous hand, hairy and repulsive, was pressed upon his lips. He realized that he was left alone and helpless, and utterly in the power of whatever being it was that haunted this wood wherein the common story went that many people mysteriously vanished, never more to be seen on the face of the earth.

CHAPTER XVI

The Grave

He wondered vaguely if those other disappearances of which people told had happened like this, and he felt the cords cutting like thin fire into his wrists and ankles as he lay waiting for the end that something seemed to tell him was purposed and inevitable and not likely to be long delayed.

A thought came to him of Esme waiting in the village where he had left her, waiting for his return who would never come again. He found himself wondering what she would think. Would she preserve her trust in him, or would doubts and suspicions grow in her mind till she came to believe that he had deserted her? Would she ever learn the truth? He thought not; he had an idea that whatever was going to be done would be well hidden.

Even as he lay helpless in his bonds he writhed to think how easily he had been duped, how childishly he had walked into the trap laid for him. It had been easy enough to learn his name—though

apparently Keith had been taken for his surname, not for his first name—and the mere whispering it through the trees in the dark had been enough to lure him to the spot where his unknown and hideous enemy lurked in hiding—waiting, literally, to fall upon him unawares. Why, he had come as simply and easily as to the nursery rhyme of “Dilly, dilly, duck, come and be killed.” Why had no suspicion occurred to him? Why had he let his nerves be so easily played on? Why had he yielded so foolishly to a babyish awe and sense of wonder that a ten-year-old child ought to have been proof against?

Madly, furiously, wildly, he writhed and struggled as he lay upon the ground, striving to free himself from the tightly drawn cords that held him so securely. But his efforts were useless, and as he struggled there came to his ears a faint, new sound that was like nothing he had ever heard before, but that he knew somehow was a horrid and disgusting laughter.

“Who are you?” he said, loudly and abruptly.

There was no answer, but a beam of light shone upon him suddenly, either from an electric torch or from a dark lantern of which the slide had been drawn back suddenly. It showed him nothing, for it shone upon him from behind, but he understood that his captor was watching him, gloating over his helplessness, and it seemed to him a fearful thing

that he had to lie there in that bright beam of light while his enemy remained hidden in the gloom and darkness around.

"Who are you?" he said again.

There was still no answer, but he heard fresh sounds, sounds that for some time he could not identify. His captor was certainly working hard, and presently it dawned on Keith that he was digging, digging very hard and fast in the soft mould near by. He asked himself curiously what reason his captor could be digging at such an hour in such a place? Why or what? . . . and the answer came into his mind very suddenly that what was being dug at this time and place was a grave.

He had still been struggling, more quietly but very strenuously, to free himself from his bonds that all his efforts seemed only to draw tighter, but now he ceased all at once and lay still, and he felt a cold sweat come upon his body from his head to his feet.

For he was afraid, desperately afraid, with a sensuous and shrinking fear such as a little child may know in presence of vague but awful terrors.

He tried to beat this terror down, and he listened again. There was no doubt now, it was the sound of digging that he heard, and he called out sharply:

"You . . . you there."

No answer came, nor was there any pause in the

digging that went on very vigorously and quickly. He lay and listened and from behind him the ray of light still shone upon him and picked him out so that he made the centre of a brilliant patch of light in the midst of that dark wood, and yet could see nothing himself save shadows around and the stars shining dimly overhead.

At last the sound of the digging ceased, and he supposed that the work was complete. His thoughts were beginning to wander a little, and he felt somewhat dazed, and still the thought worried him whether the other people who were said to have vanished in this wood had been through the same experience and died in the same way. If so, he thought, he was sorry for them.

There was a faint click and the light in which he lay vanished suddenly, so that again all was very dark. He became aware of a slow shuffling sound as though some one or something that did not walk with ease was coming near. He heard a scream, very loud and terrible and shrill, and he did not know who had uttered that dreadful cry till he felt an enormous hand, repulsive and hairy, press hard upon his mouth.

"That was me, screaming like a girl," he thought. "I must buck up; a fellow oughtn't to be a coward."

The enormous hand that had pressed upon his mouth was withdrawn and began to grope and feel

about him as he lay, and when it touched his throat it lingered there, pressing softly and almost lovingly as though yearning in sensuous longing to press and crush and squeeze till it had driven out all life. To Keith it seemed that the bitterness of death was over indeed, but the hand withdrew again, and began once more to feel him up and down, pawing him as a butcher before slaughter may feel the points of a newly-purchased beast.

“Well, you know,” Keith said argumentatively, “you might as well get it over and be done with it.”

He was not afraid now; it was as though from the very awfulness of his position he derived a certain courage. As it is said that those sick to death know no fear, so he, knowing that the end was certain, found all his earlier terror quite gone away.

It seemed to him certain that death must either be an entry into nothingness—and who can be so foolish as to fear nothingness?—or else the beginning of a new life; and why should one fear life?

He felt the hairy hands that had been groping up and down upon his body settle now on the cords that were twined around his arms and body, and by them begin to drag him roughly along the ground. He could offer no resistance, and in this way he was pulled along for some distance. Who

it was that used him so he could not make out in the least; he was aware only of a dark and crouching form indistinctly visible in the heavy darkness of the night; he heard only a low, grunting breathing, very heavy and laboured.

When he had been pulled along like this for some distance there was a pause, and he was allowed to lie still. But only for a moment, for first he was twisted round as though it were necessary that he should lie in one special position, and then he received a violent push in the side and felt himself falling . . . falling . . . but not very far, only some two or three feet, though enough to bruise and shake him badly. And above still shone the faint stars half hidden by drifting clouds and all around was the smell of damp, freshly dug earth that pressed him closely and narrowly on every side.

He realized as in a flash of overwhelming horror that while yet quick and sentient he had been thrust into the grave here dug for him.

And even as he understood he heard a low bestial chuckling on the firm ground above, and the first spadeful of flying earth came down upon him where he lay, and some of the mould was damp and cold upon his cheek and some of it rested with great weight upon his chest.

From above he heard a voice call:

"Where are you? Where are you? Have you finished? Is it done?"

Keith knew the voice for that of the man who had talked with him under the great oak. Apparently he was come back to see if the task he had delegated to his instrument was over yet.

"Is it done? Is it done? Curse this darkness," the voice repeated. "Have you done it?" And down into the grave where Keith lay bound and helpless a light flashed for an instant as an electric torch was switched on and off at once. "You've done it, then? You've finished it?"

There came in answer a sort of inarticulate and grunting mumble like no human language Keith knew, but that appeared to convey a negative.

"What do you mean?" the new-comer asked, his voice high and uneven. "What are you doing . . . you are, aren't you? . . . do you mean he's alive in there?"

It seemed that this time the inarticulate and grunted response conveyed an affirmative, and this avowal that their victim still lived, though thrust into his grave, appeared too much for the speaker, who uttered a sort of choking cry, and in recoiling quickly, as from horror too great for him, caught his foot in the spreading roots of the oak and stumbled and fell.

It was as though that low cry of instinctive horror

and the sound of the stumble and fall acted somehow as a stimulus to Keith to urge him to fresh and yet more tremendous effort.

Narrowly confined though he lay between the narrow walls of fresh dug earth pressing him on each side, bound as he was hand and foot by tight-drawn cords, he wrenched himself by an effort almost superhuman into a sitting position, and tore afresh at the bonds with which he was fastened and that his fall and the rough handling he had received while being dragged over the ground had a little loosened.

They stretched, gave way a little farther, so mightily did he struggle, and with one great and final effort he tore free one bruised and bleeding hand. He had a little penknife in his waistcoat pocket. He got it out and opened it with his teeth, and swiftly, swiftly, cut through the other bands that still held him, and so stood upright and free in the grave.

At a little distance he could just distinguish in the gloom a dark shadowy mass composed, he thought, of the man he had heard stumble and of the other man or beast, or whatever it was, helping him to his feet. Even as he looked this form separated from the other, and turned and began to shamble back towards the grave, and Keith leaped out of it and ran, ran wildly, blindly, madly,

drunk with terror and exhaustion, on and on through the sheltering darkness that fell around him like a cloak of protection, on and on without pause or stay, on through bush and undergrowth, by stream and tree, heeding nothing, aware of nothing save only his one wild impulse to flee.

At first he was pursued, he thought, for he heard sounds behind. But they died away presently, for he ran with the wild speed of uttermost fear, and besides the darkness favoured him, and at last he came somehow to the outskirts of the woods.

He felt safer then, for it seemed to him that the power of the fiendish thing from which he had escaped was always greatest in the wood, beneath the trees.

A little farther he ran, and then in a fold of the ground, on a low bank near a little bush, he fell down and lay still, scarce able to persuade himself he still lived and had escaped whole from the horror of the wood.

CHAPTER XVII

The Wentworths

Where he had fallen there he lay, not sleeping, but in a kind of dazed and comatose condition, never moving, scarcely breathing, till presently the sun rose, and its life-giving warmth began to draw him back to conscious existence.

He lifted himself on one knee and remained, looking wildly at the wood that at a little distance showed itself quiet and lovely in all the glory of its summer foliage. Shuddering, he rose and began to walk unsteadily away from it. But as he moved the motion and the warmth of the sun and the fresh cool air of the morning helped to restore the balance of his nerves, and he sighed once or twice and stretched himself and shook his shoulders in the manner of one relieving himself from a heavy burden.

The brightness began to come back to his eyes, the steadiness to his walk; through his cramped and stiffened limbs the blood began again to circulate. He stood still and looked slowly round. The wood

was some distance behind, and he found now that he could regard it steadily. On his left lay the house, and presently he turned and walked towards it.

His first impulse had been to flee away from that place for ever, but now a very different purpose was rising in his mind, and though now and again, without apparent cause, a strong convulsive shuddering shook him from head to foot, purpose and courage were returning to him. In his mind a resolution was slowly forming that he would never leave this spot till he had discovered and dealt with whatever murderous abortion of nature or humanity lurked in the shelter of those trees.

"It must be a man of some sort or kind," he mused, for indeed, though he did not phrase it so to himself, he felt that the love of cruelty for cruelty's sake that had been shown to him was purely human. He remembered, too, that it had had hands—he trembled afresh as he thought of them, monstrous and hairy, groping upon him—and that it had seemed able to make some sort of intelligible communication by means of its uncouth grunting.

He felt certain, therefore, the creature was human, although human, he thought, in some very strange and beastly manner, and now, too, those other stranger, wilder thoughts that had seemed

natural enough in the night and the darkness did not survive in the full light of day and the clear warmth of the sun. Man then, of some kind, he decided his enemy must be, and as man, therefore, he could be traced and found and brought to justice.

It was still very early, and there was no sign of life about the house. Keith thought to himself that very probably it would be late before either of the inmates appeared, for he did not suppose that the man would be able to shake off very soon the effects of the whisky he had taken, and the woman had had her lamp burning in her room until the small hours of the morning. Though he was feeling much better and stronger, Keith was still both weary and hungry. He helped himself to some of the fruit growing in the garden, and then made up a bed with some old sacks in the tool house.

He did not sleep much, and if he did drop off into momentary slumber he wakened again almost immediately with a start of terror and with cold sweat upon his brow and hands. But at any rate it was a rest to lie there in the cool, dim shed, and presently, when the morning was well advanced, he heard from without sounds as of some one moving to and fro. Peeping from the tool house door he saw that the tall and lovely woman he had watched

the night before had opened the kitchen door and was beginning to occupy herself with household tasks. She looked ill, he thought. Her face was pale, and her eyes red and somewhat bloodshot, as though during the night she had slept little and wept much, nor was there any briskness or vitality in her movements.

He watched her for a little, and she went back into the house and closed the door. He waited a few minutes, hesitating whether to begin by telling frankly his recent experiences or whether to appear at first simply as a stray tramp, seeking work, and in that character wait and watch developments. This last course seemed to him the most prudent, and after waiting a few moments he came out of the tool shed and knocked at the kitchen door.

It was not opened till he had knocked twice again, and then when Mrs. Wentworth, as he was certain now she must be, came to the door her pallor and evident distress were both even more marked. She seemed very doubtful of him, too, and appeared quite relieved when he asked for some food, offering to do in return any work she wished, and saying that he had come all the way from the coast and was on his way to London.

"But I don't know if I have any work to give you," she said.

"There's the garden," he urged. "I had to

sleep out last night. I don't think I can go any farther unless I can get something to eat."

She still hesitated a little, but plainly her alarm was lessening and she was beginning to pity him. Indeed, his condition was deplorable enough, and she said suddenly:

"You are all over mud behind."

"Yes . . . yes," he muttered, and felt himself shiver as he realized that that was the fresh earth from the new dug grave into which he had been thrown, and wherefrom he had so barely escaped.

"What is it? Are you ill?" she asked, for her first impression was that he was about to faint. "You had better come in and rest. Sit down, and I will get you something to eat."

He did as she told him, for indeed he felt very faint and ill, and she poured out a cup of tea and cut some bread.

"I have very little in the house," she said apologetically; "there is no butter at all; and I haven't cooked anything yet."

But the tea was very welcome and refreshing. She had made it strong, and it was hot and sweet, and he ate a little bread, too, and then she poured out some more tea for him. He felt very much better for his meal, and she allowed him when he had finished to busy himself with various odd jobs. He was occupied cleaning the knives when he

heard a voice calling from within, and Mrs. Wentworth said hurriedly:

"That's my husband; he is not very well. Yes, Dick, yes."

She hurried away, and Keith could hear them talking in the dining-room, or rather he heard the man grumbling and complaining in the vile, unreasonable temper that is the result of too much whisky, and Mrs. Wentworth answering in soothing, gentle tones. Presently he heard the man—Dick Wentworth, as Keith was now assured—say something about tea, and then come down the passage and into the kitchen.

Keith was at the door busy with his knives, and Dick gave him a sulky, ill-tempered look. Obviously Dick was in the temper to quarrel with anybody about anything, but he did not seem surprised at seeing him, so presumably Mrs. Wentworth had warned him of Keith's presence. There was a chair drawn up to the table, and Dick sat down on it and leaned his head on his hands.

"My head's fit to split," he said.

Mrs. Wentworth poured him out a cup of tea and he drank some grumblingly.

"Wishywashy stuff," he complained. "I want something a bit stronger."

"Oh, Dick, dear," Mrs. Wentworth said pitifully.

"Yes, Reenie . . . dear," he mimicked her roughly, "what's the matter with you? Hi, you fellow there."

"Sir," answered Keith, turning.

"There's a pub down the road, three miles or so. Get me a couple of bottles of whisky, there, will you, the best they have."

"Oh, Dick, Dick, please . . ." Reenie implored and began to cry softly to herself.

"Shut it, old girl," said Dick, though less unkindly than before; "there's nothing else to do. I'm in the soup; not you, you know."

"Dick," she implored, coming nearer to him, "Dick, if you will only pull yourself together . . . ?"

"What's the good?" he asked. "I'm done; it's all up with me. You'll be able to manage somehow, but I'm done for; that old beast has got me all right; I might have known he would." He took some silver from his pocket and handed it to Keith. "Get off," he said, "and be back as sharp as you can."

Keith shook his head.

"Better take the lady's advice," he said. "When things are bad, getting drunk doesn't make them any better."

They both stared at him in blank surprise for a

moment, and then Dick jumped to his feet in great wrath.

"Confound your impudence," he cried. "Take yourself off; clear out."

He advanced threateningly on Keith, and then suddenly sat down again.

"I say, I do feel bad," he muttered.

"Have some hot tea," Reenie said, emptying his cup and filling it again with fresh tea. She said to Keith: "We have been away, and when we got back last night we found some one had been here and robbed us."

"It isn't only that," muttered Dick moodily, "it's worse than that."

"I wanted to tell you," Reenie said to him, obviously trying to keep his thoughts away from the whisky, "there has been a woman here. I am sure of it."

"Very likely," answered Dick. "Why not? The old brute would employ any one to do his dirty work, man, woman, or child. What I do want to know though, is, who gave us away? If Bert wasn't in South Africa, I should think he was at the bottom of it."

"It's no good worrying about that," said Reenie slowly. "I dare say most likely it's some one he sent who has been here. If you will eat some

breakfast we could talk it over and decide what to do."

"I don't want anything to eat," grumbled Dick. "And get rid of that fellow," he added, glaring at Keith; "give him a shilling and pack him off. Perhaps he is one of them."

From where Keith stood he could see part of the wood and the spot where began that path by which on the night of his first arrival he had approached the house. At this moment he saw some one moving there, the figure of a man apparently, coming quickly down the path. Almost at once he stepped out from the shelter of the trees into the open and moved on down the path towards the house, and Keith said:

"There is some one coming, an oldish man with a white beard."

Reenie gave a little cry. Dick jumped to his feet and stood with his mouth open, his face very pale, trembling violently. Both were evidently greatly disturbed and frightened, and down the path to the house the new-comer swiftly advanced.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Burnt Will

The old man who had appeared so unexpectedly from out of the wood advanced very quickly and with long and firm strides, as one who had a definite errand to perform and wished to lose no time. Neither Dick Wentworth nor his wife spoke as they watched him approach, but it seemed they knew him, and their air and manner began to take on something of despair, as though the worst, long expected, was now happening. They had apparently entirely forgotten the presence of Keith at whom they did not even glance, and he for his part experienced a growing excitement, for he thought that he was almost certainly about to witness the unveiling of some part at least of this baffling mystery.

That the old man appearing so abruptly from out of the wood was neither of his assailants of the previous night he was, of course, quite certain, but he remembered that one of them had spoken of sending off a telegram and had suggested that Keith

would be able to guess to whom it had gone. And it was the recipient of that message that Keith supposed this old man to be.

He glanced at Dick Wentworth and his wife, and thought that neither of them showed to the best advantage nor was likely to make a very favourable impression on the new-comer. Dick, unwashed, unshaven, dishevelled from his night upon the floor, his heavy features and bloodshot eyes showing plain traces of his recent debauch, was standing leaning against the doorpost, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the ground, his whole expression that of a sullen culprit awaiting condemnation. Mrs. Wentworth was at least tidy in appearance, but her face was paler than ever; she was greatly agitated and looked more than half inclined to run away. She had as it were shrunk in upon herself, and all her prettiness seemed to have left her as though shrivelled and scorched away by her fear. Keith felt very sure that nothing would be less likely than her attitude of cringing terror to placate the stern-looking old man who was now only a few yards away.

It did not, however, occur to Keith that he himself, unwashed and unshaven like Dick, his ragged clothing covered with earth stains, his whole appearance at first glance that of a specially disreputable tramp, was displaying a presence by no

means likely to lessen this unfavourable impression he feared the other two would make.

He was standing a little apart, and the old man saw him first and then the other two, and came straight up to them. He was well and carefully dressed in a light grey suit with a soft homburg hat, and wore gold eye-glasses and a heavy gold chain across his white waistcoat. His whole appearance was that of a man of wealth and standing, and his keen bright eyes under shaggy grey eyebrows, his prominent hooked nose and his heavy square jaw seemed to proclaim him a man of great resolution and decision of character, and one whose naturally domineering temper and habit of self-will had not been softened by a long and successful career.

To the sulky downcast Dick standing with his hands in his pockets leaning against the doorpost he presented a striking contrast, and yet there was between them a faint resemblance like that of two statues made from one model, but one to represent strength and the other weakness.

At first the old man did not speak. He gave Keith one quick glance that passed him over as of total unimportance; he gave Reenie another glance that seemed to say she mattered hardly more; and on Dick he concentrated a perfect glare of wrathful contempt.

"So you are here," he said slowly at last. "I wanted to make sure with my own eyes."

"Why shouldn't I be here?" Dick muttered.

"I suppose you think another lie or two doesn't matter," said the old man. "Have you anything to say for yourself? If so, I shall be interested to hear it."

"A man has got a right to marry whom he likes," mumbled Dick.

"You chose to disobey me, to defy me," retorted the old man, "though you owed me everything, everything. You——"

"It was my fault," interrupted Reenie in tones so trembling as to be hardly distinguishable, and stopped suddenly, as it were made dumb by the terrible glance the old man shot at her.

"I won't dispute it," he said to her sardonically. "I have no doubt you thought you were going to marry a rich man's heir—and that the doddering old fool would soon be coaxed over. Well, you made a mistake. I'm not easily coaxed over, and you married a beggar—look at him"—he flung out a scornful hand at the unhappy Dick—"a drunken good-for-nothing," he sneered. "And worse. Let me tell you something, sir. I have had your accounts audited."

Dick winced visibly and tried to moisten his dry lips.

"There's a discrepancy of a good many thousand pounds," continued the old man. "You are not only ungrateful and disobedient, you have not only chosen to defy my express wishes, you have betrayed your trust and you are an embezzler and a thief."

"I had got to have money somehow," Dick answered with a little more spirit than he had shown so far. "You kept me so infernally short, and I had got to have some somehow when I married. Besides, it was mine really; I was only borrowing my own. You always said it would all be mine."

"It would have been yours some day if you had chosen to respect my wishes," retorted the old man, "but now you shall never have a penny of it. Your borrowing, as you call it, was mere theft, and I shall see you answer for it."

"Going to prosecute?" asked Dick, lifting a pale, defiant face. "A nice scandal that will make. Mr. Wentworth of Wentworth's, one of the leading houses in the iron and lead trade, prosecutes his nephew who is sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, eh?"

"Most likely," answered the old man implacably. "I shall be surprised if you escape penal servitude."

"Look here, uncle," began Dick, his first manner of sullen defiance beginning to weaken a lit-

tle, "you needn't rub it in so thick. I know I oughtn't to have done it, but I thought . . . I thought I had a right to some. Besides, you've got it all back."

"What do you mean? I have got none back," answered the old man.

"It must be your people you sent here who took it," Dick insisted. "I thought if we had to bolt we had better have something to go on. Now you've got it back, and I think you might be satisfied with that."

"I don't know what you mean," said old Mr. Wentworth angrily. "I think you are still drunk, and if you imagine I will spare a thief because he happens to be my nephew you are mistaken. I came here to make sure with my own eyes. I am satisfied now. Do you see this?"

As he spoke he took from his pocket a large formal-looking document.

"My will," he said; "it makes you my sole heir."

He took out a matchbox and struck a match and put a light to the document. It burnt slowly and steadily in the clear still morning air. They all watched the little flames consume it, and the old man stood holding it out at arm's length till it was nearly all burnt away, when he dropped it and put his heel on what was left.

"And I warn you," he said, "that as soon as I return home I shall apply for a warrant for your arrest. I am not to be robbed with impunity, as you will find to your cost."

"Well, you've got it all back, haven't you?" Dick insisted, sullenly.

The old man gave him a wrathful stare and was in the act of turning away when Reenie sprang forward.

"Oh, please, please forgive us," she cried. "If Dick has done anything wrong I know he didn't mean to, and it's only because he was so worried for me, and if you like I will go away and never see him again, never, never, if only you won't be hard on him, and we are both very sorry indeed."

"It's no use saying that now," the old man answered coldly. "Most people are sorry for what they do when they find it doesn't bring them all the advantage they expected. I have been treated disgracefully, with the blackest ingratitude," he cried with sudden heat, and turning away came face to face to Keith who was standing near. "Who are you? What the mischief do you want?" Mr. Wentworth demanded angrily.

"I only wanted to ask," said Keith, "if you are here as a result of a telegram you received yesterday?"

"Confound your insolence," roared the old man. "What's that to do with you? What do you mean? Who are you?"

"Keith Norton," answered Keith promptly.

"One of my nephew's accomplices, one of the scoundrels he collected round him, I suppose," said Mr. Wentworth. "Well, you had better take care or you may find the police after you as well."

"And that telegram, am I right in thinking you received one?" Keith insisted.

"Mind your own business," cried the old man, still more angrily.

"But I consider it is my business," answered Keith, "for I believe that whoever sent you that telegram tried to murder me last night, and so you see I am interested."

Old Mr. Wentworth stared at Keith as if he quite failed to understand this and looked more angry still. His face was quite pale with rage, his lips were blue, his beard and moustache seemed to bristle, and he appeared to find it difficult to breathe, as though his rage were suffocating him. With a furious gesture he swung round upon his heel and marched away, and the three by the house door watched him in silence as he went.

"Oh, Dick, what will he do?" Reenie exclaimed at last, turning to her husband. "Oh, Dick . . ."

"It's all up," Dick muttered. "I'm done. I

always thought he might prosecute, and I believe he means to."

"Run after him," Reenie urged. "Dick, he can never be so cruel, so hard and cruel. Run after him, quick. Tell him you are very sorry, tell him we will part and never see each other again, tell him we will do anything he likes. Quick, Dick, run, run."

She almost pushed him in her eagerness, and Dick, after a momentary hesitation, began to follow old Mr. Wentworth, who by this time was half way to the wood. He walked on quickly, without once looking back, and before Dick could overtake him he vanished beneath the trees.

Keith turned to Reenie.

"He seemed in a bit of a temper," he remarked.

"He wanted Dick to marry some one else," she muttered, "and he married me instead. He'll never forgive us."

"He certainly didn't seem in a very forgiving mood," agreed Dick. "Far from it."

She went back into the house as though hardly hearing what he said and sat down in the kitchen, and then came out again with a shilling in her hand and offered it to Keith.

"I think you had better go now," she said.

"I think I'll stay here," he answered. "I'm interested, more interested than you know."

She was not listening, and she offered him the shilling again, and then Dick appeared from the wood, coming back to the house.

He was alone and walked slowly and heavily, and Reenie, forgetting all about Keith, went anxiously to meet him.

"Wouldn't he listen?" she said.

"I couldn't find him," Dick answered. "I don't know what had become of him; I couldn't see him anywhere. But it doesn't matter. Nothing any one could say would make any difference to him when he's in such a temper. I don't know where he could have got to, though; I couldn't see him anywhere."

CHAPTER XIX

The Hidden Jewellery

"It was the trees," Reenie said quickly; "you ought to have gone on; you would have seen him again at once." She paused and added with a little movement of her hands: "It would have been no good."

"No," agreed Dick moodily. "No."

Keith had turned and was staring at the wood that lay so green and shady in the hot sunshine. The expression used by Dick that old Mr. Wentworth had "vanished" startled him for the moment, but he put away the momentary fear he experienced with the reflection that the old man had already come through the wood once with safety, and that there was no reason to suppose any danger threatened his life. Besides, it was broad daylight now, and then Keith was sure that the attack made on him the night before had been personal and aimed only at himself. Still, it was odd, a little disturbing, that Dick should have chanced to use such an expression.

Dick, sullen and downcast, was in the act of entering the house when he seemed to remember Keith's presence.

"Here, you," he shouted, "clear out; take yourself off; what are you hanging about here for? Clear out and look sharp about it."

Keith turned again and came slowly towards him.

"Look here," he said, "I wish you would tell me what all this means. I'm not asking out of curiosity," he added quickly as Dick seemed about to burst into a fresh torrent of wrath. "I have a serious reason for asking, and I think perhaps I may be able to help you."

"You!" repeated Dick, surprised and doubtful. "You . . . how?"

"I don't know," answered Keith frankly. "There is a lot I don't understand. But I am not here quite by accident; I can tell you that. And I've seen enough to know some very queer work is going on. There have been two attempts made to murder me, for example."

They both looked at him, but evidently were by no means satisfied, and Keith said again:

"You might as well trust me. Let me ask you a question. Do you know anything about—jewellery?"

"Jewellery?" repeated Dick, starting violently.

"Why do you say that? What do you know about it? Are you one of his lot?"

"Whose lot?" asked Keith. "We shan't get much farther forward by asking questions and never answering them. I will tell you how I came to be here. I was tramping to London, and I found this place empty, with doors and windows open, and apparently left in a most extraordinary hurry. I was about done up and I helped myself to some of the food I found, and then I thought I would have a night's rest here, as there seemed no one to object. During the night an attempt was made to murder me, to strangle me. Whoever it was got away somehow. I don't know how. If you have been nearly murdered in a house you get to feel quite at home in it, naturally, so I stayed on, and I searched it thoroughly to see if I could find out why I had been attacked, and who by. In the boxroom——"

"My jewellery!" Dick shouted. "You scoundrel; you stole them; you've got them; give me them back or . . . or . . ."

"Don't be a fool," said Keith angrily. "Listen to me, will you?"

"No, I won't," Dick cried. "Where are they? Give them me or . . ."

"You silly ass," growled Keith. "Keep your distance or I'll knock your head off," he added

as Dick made a threatening movement forward.

"Dick, Dick, don't," Reenie cried, interrupting. "Dick, you mustn't; listen to him; hear what he has to say."

"But he has the jewels," Dick cried excitedly; "he has stolen the jewels."

"He wouldn't have told us that if he had meant to keep them," Reenie said.

"Oh, well," muttered Dick, eyeing Keith doubtfully and resentfully, "where are they?"

"I will show you presently," answered Keith, "if you will try not to make such a priceless fool of yourself; you are only making things into a bigger mess than they are, you know."

"I don't see what business it is of yours," Dick said.

"I've told you two attempts have been made to murder me. If that doesn't give me some right to consider it's some business of mine, I don't know what would. What I want to understand is—well, who you are and why you are here, and what it all means?"

"I should think you'd know; the old man was pretty candid, wasn't he?" grumbled Dick.

"There is very little to tell really," interposed Reenie, "and there is no reason why you shouldn't know it all, if you want to. That gentleman who

was here just now is old Mr. Wentworth, Mr. Peter Wentworth. He is very rich, and some years ago he adopted my husband as his heir. But he wanted him very much to marry a girl belonging to a very rich and grand family, and Dick wouldn't, because he didn't like her, and he married me instead, and of course that would have made Mr. Wentworth more furious than ever if he had found out, because I'm not important at all and all my family is very poor. At first I lived in lodgings in London, and Dick came to see me when he could, but people were so inquisitive, and one or two of the landladies were awfully horrid, and every one would ask questions, and so at last Dick heard of this house and we came here because we thought it would be quiet and out of the way and no one to bother us. But we hadn't been here very long when some one sent a telegram to old Mr. Wentworth to say Dick was married and where we lived, and if he came here he would find us together. By the merest chance in the world Dick saw the telegram, and he rushed off here as fast as he could and in less than two minutes after he arrived we were away, leaving everything just as it was because nothing mattered much if only we got off before Mr. Wentworth came."

"We needn't have been in such a hurry, either, as it happened," added Dick; "the old boy's motor

ran into a lamp-post, and he was badly shaken up and never got here at all that day. So I needn't have left those jewels the way I did. But I thought they were as safe there as anywhere, or as they would be carting them about to lodging-houses and hotels. As soon as I thought the coast was clear I came back to get them and they were gone. Some one had evidently been living in the house some time, and I took it the old man had had some one here, nosing round, and that he had found the jewellery and cleared it off."

"So then you got drunk," observed Keith; "jolly silly idea. But what are these jewels? Where do they come from and how did you get them?"

"I bought them," answered Dick shortly. "You heard what he said about my accounts being short, and how he was going to the police and all the rest of it—he will, too. Well, you see, the accounts got wrong by degrees somehow. I knew there was bound to be a bust up. He was more and more set on my marrying Agnes Oateley all the time, and the more he was set on it the more I wasn't going to do it. I would have blown my brains out first. So I didn't care much if the accounts did go wrong. But when I found I was £50 short and couldn't say how—I hadn't had it, I swear that; it was some mistake somewhere; I hadn't touched a penny then—I knew he had the whiphand of me. That's what

he likes. He wants all the rest of the world to be clockwork and him to have the key. I knew if he found out it would be gaol or marry Aggie Oateley. So I thought I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and all I took—he always said it would all be mine some day—I spent on jewellery. It was a man I knew in the jewellery trade put me up to that; he said it was the safest and easiest way there was. Stocks and shares and bonds and bank notes can always be traced, and gold is too heavy, but you can always deal in jewellery, and wedding rings are as good as cash. And if you say you are a traveller in jewellery you can take your stuff anywhere and no questions asked. If you've got it, where is it?"

"Oh, I've got it all right," said Keith. "I am beginning to see things more clearly now. But who is it tried to murder me?"

Dick shook his head.

"I know nothing about that," he said.

"Who sent Mr. Wentworth the telegram you talk about?"

"I don't know that either," answered Dick. "I wish I did. I should have said it was Bert, only he is in South Africa, and I don't see what good it would do him. But it would be like him all the same."

"Who is Bert?"

"Mr. Wentworth's stepson. His mother is dead, but under the marriage settlements he is heir unless expressly excluded by will. It was his marriage gave the old man his capital for his first big start, and she thought her son ought to be the chief heir, but agreed to her husband having the power to exclude him for any good reason. He provided the good reason all right, and the old man gave him the choice of leaving the country or being prosecuted. That was when he adopted me. I was to be heir instead of Bert. Of course Bert hated me like poison. I thought then it was jolly good luck for me, but I don't now."

"Is this Bert a tall man with long arms and legs and a face that looks all skin and bone, very little small bright eyes, and a very strong growth of beard?"

"You've seen him; he's here?" Reenie cried excitedly.

"I think so," Keith answered. "I think I saw him last night. I think it was he who tried to murder me. Mr. Wentworth has just burnt his will. Then if he died suddenly, his stepson, Bert, would be his heir?"

"No fear of that," answered Dick; "he won't die yet, not him, not till he has made a fresh will. He always had an idea of founding a Wentworth institute or library or something of that kind. And

that's what he'll do. He'll take care neither Bert nor I ever touch a penny."

But Keith was staring at the wood, the silent, shady wood, and he remembered how Dick had said that in it the old man had vanished and could not be found.

"About my jewellery?" Dick said abruptly.

"I'll show you where it is," said Keith; "it's close by, though I'll guarantee neither you nor any one else would ever find it. But we had better be careful and think what we are going to do. I have an idea there may be trouble ahead."

"Let's have my jewellery first," said Dick impatiently.

"All right," said Keith. "Come this way. In that wood"—he nodded towards it—"there's . . . something."

"What do you mean?" asked Dick.

"I don't know, I wish I did," said Keith, still staring abstractedly at the wood. "You say this cousin of yours, Bert Wentworth, has been in South Africa?"

"Yes," said Dick impatiently, "he went there. The jewellery——"

"It is just here," Keith said. "I suppose there are precious queer peoples in South Africa—Bushmen and Hottentots and what not?"

"What do you keep talking about South Africa

for?" demanded Dick, looking very doubtful and angry. "Are you bluffing me about that jewellery?"

"No, I'll show it you," answered Keith. "South Africa—oh, you and your jewellery be hanged together; if you had been through what I did last night you wouldn't be in such a stew about it. But it's just here."

CHAPTER XX

A New Mystery

"Where? where?" Dick asked impatiently. Keith had turned his glance again to the wood, and it was in his mind that instead of troubling about the jewellery, which after all was safe enough where it was and where it had been so long, they would do better to assure themselves concerning old Mr. Wentworth's safety.

"I say," he began, "don't you think we had better first of all——"

But Dick exploded at that into the fiercest rage.

"I believe you are trying to make a fool of me," he shouted. "Where are my jewels? You've had them; tell me where they are, quick, or . . ."

It was plain he was working himself into a state of the greatest anger and excitement, and that unless he was satisfied quickly his rage and fury would impel him to some violent action. Keith said impatiently:

"Hang you and your beastly jewels, too. They're here."

As he spoke he moved a yard or two and stamped on the flags of the yard outside the kitchen door where they were standing; at a spot under which was the big subterranean tank for storing rain-water, containing when full a good many hundred gallons. Dick did not at first understand.

"What do you mean?" he growled suspiciously. "Don't try to fool me or you'll be sorry for it. The rainwater tank's there."

"That's where your precious jewellery is," repeated Keith.

Dick stepped forward and pulled up the heavy stone slab that covered the entrance to the tank and stared down doubtfully.

"Where?" he said, "whereabouts? It's full of water."

In point of fact it was not much more than half full, for of late there had not been a great deal of rain. But looking down one saw a dark surface of water that seemed to suggest great depth and expanse.

"Where?" Dick repeated and flashed at Keith a look of new suspicion. "I don't see . . ." he said.

"It's under the water," Keith explained. "I tied the stuff up in three bundles, in three pillow-cases I got out of one of the drawers, and I chucked them down there."

"Down there? What for?" cried Dick.

"To be safe. I thought that was about the safest hiding place I could find," answered Keith. "No one would be likely to think of it, and no one could get the stuff up again without a good deal of hard work even if they knew it was there."

"How are we to get it?" asked Dick.

"I should think a rake would do if you get one from the tool house," answered Keith. "If not, we must empty all the water out. Wait a moment first of all. I'm not easy about your uncle. There is something precious queer about that wood, and you said when you went after him just now you couldn't see him; you said he had vanished. It's a queer place, that wood. Now I've told you where your jewellery is, let us make sure first of all he is all right. The jewellery has been down there so long that another hour or two won't hurt it."

"I want to see it myself. I want to make sure you're not trying to fool me," retorted Dick. "Uncle's all right, and I don't care if he isn't; he can look after himself anyhow. It was only because of the trees I couldn't see him, and I tell you plainly I don't trust you. I want to see those jewels for myself; you may be up to something for all I know. Reenie, get me a rake out of the tool house."

Dick was plainly in a very excited and

wrought-up state, and Keith realized that opposition would probably result in a personal encounter, for which he was by no means anxious. It would mean waste of time and energy, and besides he was exceedingly anxious to work with Dick if he could and not against him. But in Dick's present mood any further attempt at delay would almost certainly result in a violent scene, and Keith said impatiently:

"All right, have your own way."

"I mean to; I'm not going to be made a fool of, thank you," Dick retorted.

Reenie came up with a rake she had found in the tool house, and Keith took it from her and, kneeling down by the gaping mouth of the tank, began to grope and feel in the water. But though he tried persistently for some time he found nothing except mud and bits of rotting twigs or leaves that had blown in at one time or another.

"It's no good," he said at last; "we must empty the tank."

Dick said nothing. He was looking blacker and more doubtful all the time. He went to the little hand pump in the scullery by which the water was drawn up from the tank and worked it energetically, and Keith got a bucket and rope and helped to bail out the water. Even so it took the two of them

some time before at last the tank was empty except for a few inches of water and mud which they could not get rid of. Keith procured a lantern, too, and lowered it at the end of a rope, but the light was not very strong, and he could not make out the bundles anywhere.

"Come and help me get a ladder," he said to Dick. "I'll go down; the bundles must have got covered with mud somehow."

Dick said not a word as he went with Keith round the house to where the ladder was kept, but it was plain that his temper and his doubts were both swiftly rising to fever pitch. They brought the ladder back and put it down the tank, which was about ten or twelve feet deep, and Keith descended it, lantern and rake in hand. The floor of the tank was of concrete, the mud and water covering it was only at most four or five inches deep, and it did not need a very prolonged examination to convince Keith of what he had already begun to suspect, that the three precious bundles he had thrown down here and thought so safe in such a clever hiding place had all three vanished.

Some one had been before him.

When he had climbed back up the ladder he found Dick standing at a little distance holding in his hand a heavy piece of wood like a club.

"Well?" he said.

"All gone," said Keith briefly; "some one has got hold of it somehow."

"Yes, and I think I can guess who," retorted Dick. "I hope you don't think I've been fooled by all these antics of yours. Suppose you stop messing about like this and just tell me where my jewels are?"

"Don't be an ass," said Keith irritably. "I'm awfully sorry——"

"Yes, I'm sure you are," sneered Dick, lifting his club threateningly, "and I'm going to make you a lot sorrier."

"I must have been watched," Keith went on, controlling his temper by an effort. "It's rotten luck, but the stuff's gone and——"

"You might as well give up trying to make a fool of me," interrupted Dick. "I'm fed up. Will you tell me what you've done with it? Because if you won't, I propose to make you."

"If you are going to take that line," said Keith, losing his temper, "it's no good my saying anything, and you can go and hang yourself."

"Dick, Dick," interposed Reenie who was looking on very nervously, "I——"

"Keep quiet," Dick snarled at her. "Keep out of the way or you'll be getting hurt. Go into the house. Do as I tell you."

Reenie shrank back terrified, and Dick advanced slowly towards Keith.

"Well, what's it to be?" he said threateningly.

"You infernal fool," growled Keith, lifting his hands to be ready.

Dick made a rush at him, but Keith was on the alert, and instead of waiting for the attack, as Dick expected, he sprang forward, and with very great rapidity flung in two swift tremendous blows, straight from the shoulder, left and right alternately. The first blow took Dick upon the cheek and staggered him, the second caught him clear between the eyes and fairly lifted him from the ground to fall heavily full length backwards, supine on the flags of the yard. Reenie screamed shrilly and ran forward with her arms held out as if to protect him, and Keith drew back.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, "but he would have it. He's not hurt, nothing to speak of; he'll be all right in a minute. I'll get you some water."

He went into the house and brought out a basin full of water and looked on while Reenie bathed the prostrate man's bruised face, supporting his head in her lap and looking very pale and frightened.

"I'm awfully sorry," Keith repeated. "I had to do it; he was quite off his head; he would have smashed me up with that club of his if I hadn't."

Reenie was far too anxious and alarmed to

listen to him, and he put his hands in his pockets and turned away. He realized that the position was very awkward. He had confessed to a knowledge of the jewels, and most likely every one else would be as incredulous of his story and of his declaration that he was ignorant of their present whereabouts as Dick had shown himself to be. Every one would think he had hidden the jewellery for his own benefit. And the plans that had been beginning to form in his mind for solving the mystery, and that had all involved Dick's co-operation, were ruined. Personally he had no doubt as to what had become of the lost jewels. That lurking horror of the wood that had twice attempted to murder him had no doubt secured them, but how would he be able to get any one to believe so when most likely they would not even believe in the existence of such a creature? He supposed ruefully that really the rainwater tank had been an awfully silly hiding place to choose, though at the time he had thought it such a good one and perfectly safe.

Dick was sitting up now and feeling his head tenderly, and Keith strolled up to him.

"Of course I'm awfully sorry," he said, "but I had to get my whack in first. And I'm sorry about the jewellery, too. I can't make you believe me, but I'm telling the truth about it."

"You can hit jolly hard and jolly quick," re-

marked Dick reflectively, getting slowly to his feet.

"Well, I dare say you weren't up to your best form," remarked Keith apologetically.

"You got in thundering quick," repeated Dick.

He seemed quieter now and less excited, and altogether in a more reasonable mood.

"If I had wanted to steal the stuff," Keith urged, "I should have cleared off and never said a word to you; you didn't suspect me at all. Unless I had liked, there was no need for me to say a word. I know it's a big let in, the stuff going like this. But I know who's done it."

"Who?" asked Dick.

"There's somebody, something, some one lurking in that wood for some reason or another," Keith answered. "That's who's got it."

"Hullo," interrupted Dick, "here's Walters—uncle's chauffeur," he added by way of explanation to Keith. "What's he want?"

A small slight young man wearing the leather jacket and gaiters of a chauffeur appeared round the side of the house and stood looking at them very curiously.

"Well, what is it?" Dick said to him sharply, and Keith remembered afterwards that he had not at first sight much liked the man's appearance.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Dick, sir," Walters answered, "it's Mr. Wentworth. I've been waiting so long I

thought I had better come and see if there were any orders, as he said he would not be more than two or three minutes."

"He isn't here," said Dick; "he was, but he's gone again; he went back through the wood."

"Did he, sir?" said Walters, watching Dick curiously. "Well, he's never come out of it the other side, for I've been waiting there all the time."

CHAPTER XXI

What Keith Found

As with one accord they all three turned to look at this wood that lay so green and shady in the blazing heat of the sun. In Keith's mind the strangest thoughts were stirring, and Dick shrugged his shoulders and said with angry impatience:

"Well, what if he did, he can stop there if he likes, can't he?"

"Yes, only what should he be stopping there for?" asked Walters, and Keith saw his small and uneasy eyes rest twinklingly first on one of them and then on the other.

"How should we know?" demanded Dick.

"Can anything have happened to him?" asked Reenie from behind.

"Don't be silly," snapped Dick. "Of course not. What could happen?"

"Now then," observed Walters argumentatively, "that's just it—what could?"

"When you went after him," Keith said to Dick, "you could see nothing of him at all?"

"No," answered Dick, "but I didn't worry myself much. He was in such a rage it wouldn't have been any good saying anything to him."

"You went after him into the wood, did you, sir?" asked Walters. "He's never come out again," he repeated thoughtfully. "It's queer. Did you say he seemed in one of his tempers, Mr. Dick?"

"Yes, I did," answered Dick, "but don't you ask so many questions. You're getting a bit too cheeky, Walters."

"Very sorry, sir," said Walters, "but you see while we was coming here he said one or two things . . . I thought . . ."

"Well, you can clear out and do your thinking somewhere else," said Dick angrily. "I don't want you hanging about here. Clear out."

"Yes, sir," said Walters; "very sorry, sir. Only you see, it is a bit queer like, because, if he went into that wood, why hasn't he come out again?"

"It is strange, Dick," said Reenie from behind. "I think perhaps something may have happened. I think you ought to go and see."

"Rot; what could happen?" asked Dick irritably.

But nevertheless he as well as Keith and Walters were all three staring intently into the green and shady depths of the wood, intently and a little strangely.

"I think you ought to go and look," Reenie repeated.

"Yes, come along," Keith said.

He began to walk towards the wood and Dick followed sulkily, muttering something under his breath as he did so. Walters followed close behind, his forehead puckered, his small eyes alert and twinkling.

They entered the wood where the path began and followed this in silence right through to the other side of the wood without finding any trace of old Mr. Wentworth. On the road they had now reached the big motor-car in which he had arrived was standing just as Walters had left it, and there was no sign of Mr. Wentworth to be seen there either.

"Where can he be?" Walters said. "I don't understand it; it isn't like him."

His small sharp little eyes flickered from one to the other in turn, and it was not difficult to see that suspicions were forming in his mind. Keith, too, was beginning to feel seriously uneasy, and Dick shrugged his shoulders and said:

"It's no business of ours; he can look after himself, can't he?"

"I think we had better have another look," said Keith, turning back to the wood.

The other two followed him, though Dick seemed

not too willing and grumbled a little to himself about wasting time and about the old man being well able to take care of himself. They returned the way they had come, but searching more closely and carefully the ground on each side of the path, and then they turned back and went through the wood length ways, still without finding any trace of the missing man. When they had gone through a third time, still without finding any trace or sign of him, and had come again to the road where the big motor-car stood, Walters said abruptly:

"He's not in the wood; he's not here; where is he?"

"I don't know and I don't care," said Dick. "I'm fed up, anyhow. He is probably working out some of his beastly clever schemes. I'm not going to waste any more time hunting for him."

"It's beginning to look to me as though something may have happened," Keith said slowly.

"Oh, that's all rot," declared Dick.

"It's not rot," retorted Keith; "that something happened to me last night in this place."

"Oh," said Walters, "what was that, sir?"

"Somebody made an attack on me," answered Keith. "I don't know who."

"That's rummier than ever, that is," declared Walters, but not very much as though he believed what Keith said. "Well, as I understand it, Mr.

Dick, sir, Mr. Wentworth had words with you and he went back through the wood to return to me where I was waiting for him with the car, but he never got to me, and when you went after him into the wood you couldn't find him and now we can't find any trace of him anywhere."

Dick did not answer. He was a little pale, and he knew that the chauffeur was looking at him with a doubtful, sideways glance, but he did not know what to say without appearing to admit that he realized how suspicious circumstances appeared. Walters said suddenly:

"I think it's a police business. I'm going straight off to fetch the police."

"All right, you can if you like," said Dick, and added a surly oath.

Walters did not answer, but went away quickly. They remained standing where he had left them, and presently they heard the sound of the engine as Walters started the car. Dick laughed uneasily.

"The blazing fool," he said; "hang his insolence, though."

"I think we had better have another look," Keith said. "It strikes me that whoever tried to murder me last night has attacked your uncle too. Or else . . ."

"That's all rubbish," said Dick in a very loud and firm voice. "Why should any one attack

him?" He laughed harshly. "I believe that ass Walters—he always was an impudent beggar—thinks I've murdered him, as if murdering the old man would do me any good when he had just burnt his will. There might have been some sense in it if I had done for him before that."

"I suppose the will might be in duplicate," remarked Keith. "I believe people sometimes make their wills in duplicate, keeping one copy and leaving the other with their lawyer or a bank."

"I believe he did that. I believe there is a duplicate," said Dick. "You can do what you like. I'm going back to the house. If Walters brings the police they can do the hunting for him if they want to."

"There is one thing," remarked Keith. "If anything has happened, it must be the same creature that tried to murder me last night . . . and I feel sure he has your jewels, too."

"What's the use of telling a yarn like that?" asked Dick scornfully. "No one will believe a word of it; I'm sure I don't. I expect you've got the jewellery yourself all the time. You can all go to the devil together," he cried with sudden passion. "I'm sick and tired of the whole business."

He turned and walked away quickly, and left to himself Keith began a careful and close search of the wood, though indeed to explore it thoroughly

would have needed a great number of men working for a good many hours. But as well as he could Keith conducted a very careful search, taking especial precautions whenever he had to pass beneath leafy trees, and once or twice even climbing some whose foliage seemed especially thick. He passed at one time during his search that great wide-spreading oak beneath which he had endured his agony of the night before. A little way distant he found the grave into which while yet alive he had been thrust and from which he had so barely escaped. He went to look at it with a kind of morbid interest and wonder, and when he found himself staring down into that grim and narrow hole, and saw the fresh turned earth piled up to one side, and smelt the odour of its dampness, and saw two worms wriggling in the mould, and remembered how awfully he had lain there and felt the earth flung down upon his prostrate form, all at once a panic fell upon him, a sudden, unreasoning, overwhelming panic, so that he turned and fled, faster and faster, rushing madly away at full speed through the quiet and pleasant wood till, as he ran, he tripped on something and fell. For a moment or two he lay trembling and shaking as with an ague, till presently he raised his head and glanced around, and then he saw that what he had stumbled on was the body of old Mr. Wentworth, lying prone

and still, his face resting on one arm, his attitude very quiet and peaceful as though he slept. But round his throat was drawn tight a knotted handkerchief, and when Keith looked closer he saw that his face was distorted and swollen and that he was dead. One end of the handkerchief that had been the cause and instrument of his death lay loose, and on the corner of it Keith saw the monogram "R. W." He remembered instantly that such a monogram—which he took to stand for Richard Wentworth—he had seen on a handkerchief in Dick's hand when they were talking about emptying the rainwater tank to find the lost jewellery.

He got to his feet and stood for a little time staring silently at the dead body and asking himself what had happened. Had Dick done this thing? he asked himself. Somehow, he did not much think so, but believed rather that here was a victim of the malign and ominous presence that haunted this strange place.

But he saw also and very clearly that the evidence against Dick would probably appear conclusive and that his own story was not likely to be believed. He thought even that he himself stood in very considerable danger of being regarded as an accomplice.

And Walters, the chauffeur, had gone for the

police. Travelling in that swift motor-car he and they might be back here almost any minute.

He stood there for a long time, considering and thinking, and he did not see that there was anything he could do except wait the trend of events, and all at once he felt utterly exhausted, so that he reeled with sheer fatigue as he stood.

At last he turned away, without touching the body, since it was very sure life had long been extinct, and he walked slowly away back to the house. No one was about when he got there, but after he had knocked twice at the kitchen door Reenie came. She looked at him hesitatingly, and for a little neither of them spoke, and he did not know what to say or whether to tell her of the tragic discovery he had made. And his exhaustion and fatigue increased so that he felt he could hardly stand upright.

"I think I had better speak to your husband if I may," he said at last.

She hesitated.

"I don't think he wants to see any one just now," she said.

"Well, I must; I must tell him something," said Keith, and turned to stare at the wood that held such strange and grim secrets. "Well," he said, "have you a sister called Esme?"

"How do you know that?" she cried, starting violently.

"You see, she was here before you came," he explained mildly.

"Here; Esme here," Reenie repeated. "When, how?"

He did not answer; his exhaustion had become so great he thought he was about to faint. He caught hold of the doorpost to support himself and he muttered:

"Do you know . . . I think I'm done up. Well, old Mr. Wentworth is dead . . . murdered."

"Murdered?" she breathed. "Murdered? Who . . . who . . .?"

"The chauffeur chap has gone for the police," Keith said. "The police will be sure to think your husband did it."

"God help us," she breathed, watching him from great tragic eyes. "He has locked himself into the dining-room; he will not come or answer when I call."

"You had better tell him," muttered Keith; "it won't do any good; you must tell him . . . no, let me tell him." He stopped and smiled foolishly. "I'm done," he said; "I'm just about done up."

He sat down in a chair near; his eyes closed; in an instant, utterly worn out, he was fast asleep.

PART FOUR

CHAPTER XXII

Waiting

When Keith awoke it was to find himself in pitchy darkness. He could not for the first moment remember where he was or what had happened, and he felt extraordinarily stiff and very cold. Each one of his limbs ached; at first when he tried to stand up he could not and fell back into the chair on which he had been sitting.

"Are you awake?" said a voice from a little distance.

"Yes . . . yes," he muttered confusedly. "Yes . . . where am I? How dark it is." He heard a clock begin to strike and he counted twelve strokes. "Oh, it's midnight," he said, as though that explained all.

He began to rub his stiff and aching limbs, and he remembered now very clearly all the crowded strange events of recent hours.

"Have the police come?" he asked suddenly.

"No," answered the voice from the darkness he knew now to be Reenie's.

"That's funny," Keith said. He got to his feet

and began to grope his way towards the door where it seemed Reenie was sitting. "It's so dark I can't see anything," he complained. "It is very strange the police have not come."

There was no answer, and he began to fumble in his pockets and finding a match he struck it and lighted the lamp that stood on the dresser. By its light he could see Reenie sitting on a small low stool in the doorway, her chin resting on her hand and her elbow on her knee. She was looking out into the night towards the wood, and she did not even glance round when he lighted the lamp, though it cast a long clear ray from the door out into the darkness.

"Well, it's funny the police haven't come," he said for the third time.

He was feeling very hungry and he helped himself to some biscuits that were on the dresser, and he poured himself out a glass of milk. When he had eaten a little he said:

"Yes, it's very funny the police haven't come. Hasn't Walters come back either?"

"No," she answered.

He could not understand this delay at all, for he could conceive no reason for the inaction of the police. He said presently:

"Your husband? Where is he? You told him . . .?"

"He is there," she said, nodding at the dark night towards where the wood lay.

Her words so startled Keith that he dropped the piece of biscuit he was putting to his mouth and stood for a moment very still.

"There? Where?" he muttered.

"There," she repeated, nodding once more towards the wood. "He has not come back," she said.

"Oh . . . well," he said at last, and began again to eat and drink. "Why did he go?" he said presently.

"He saw a light," she answered. "He saw a light, and so he went and he has not come back."

"Perhaps it was the police there," Keith remarked, but he knew that neither he nor she believed this.

"You said Esme was here?" Reenie said after a pause. "When was that? What did she say? How did you know she was my sister?"

"I didn't know; I only guessed," he answered. "She didn't tell me anything. She couldn't. She had hurt her head and her memory had quite gone."

"Gone—her memory?" repeated Reenie. "But . . . do you mean she had had an accident? Was she hurt? What was it?"

"An attack was made on her in the wood over

there," Keith answered. "Luckily I was close by. But when I found her she was insensible and her head had been hurt. I got the doctor and a nurse, and they pulled her round, but she couldn't remember a thing about herself. She didn't even know her own name. We only knew her first name was Esme, because the nurse found some things of hers that were marked."

"But do you mean . . . I don't think I understand," Reenie exclaimed. She was on her feet now. "Who attacked her? What for? Where is she now? Do you mean she is badly hurt?"

"Oh, no, she is all right now physically," answered Keith. "But she can't remember anything about herself. The doctor thought it was only a temporary condition and would pass away in time. You see she had had a nasty blow on the head. She is staying in a village not far away at present. You can go and see her as soon as you like."

Reenie asked one or two more questions; he answered as best he could; and she seemed very much disturbed and excited. She spoke of going to her sister at once, even though it was the middle of the night, but hesitated when she thought of Dick.

"I wish he would come back," she said irritably; "he said he wouldn't be long. Why is he so long? What made you guess I was Esme's sister,

if she couldn't tell you anything about herself?"

"You see," Keith explained, "she had been here before. She was all right then, of course, and she spoke of her sister she was looking for. She seemed to think I ought to know where her sister was, and wouldn't believe me when I said I didn't. She appeared very upset, and she seemed to think I had done something I oughtn't to have done, something in connection with the sister she spoke of. She wouldn't listen to me at all."

"I expect she took you for Dick," said Reenie slowly. "She must have got to know Dick and I were here; I think I can guess how. And so when she came and saw you she would think you were Dick—she had never seen him—and that you were keeping me away from her."

"I see," said Keith, understanding now the contempt and anger that Esme had shown towards him on the occasion of their first meeting. "There was something frightened her," he added, "while she was here. I don't know what, but she went upstairs and seemed to get a scare and came down and went off. She came back afterwards, and while she was coming up the path through the wood the attack I told you of was made on her."

"In the wood?" Reenie repeated, and looked again into the darkness. "Dick is a long time," she said; "he told me he wouldn't be long."

"He oughtn't to have gone," Keith muttered uneasily.

"You will take me to Esme tomorrow?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," Keith said. "Perhaps her memory will come back when she sees you. The doctor thought anything connected with her former life might restore her memory at once. How long is it since your husband went into the wood?"

"A long time," she answered, shivering a little.

"Well, what did he go for?" Keith muttered.

"I told him what you said about his uncle," she answered. "He said he didn't believe it. He wouldn't open the door at first, but I shouted through the keyhole. Then he came. He was very upset, though he said he didn't believe you. He . . . he . . ." Her voice trailed off into a whisper. "He thought people might suspect him."

She paused again and Keith nodded grimly. Her voice was a little unsteady as she went on:

"He was . . . I think he was afraid. We tried to wake you, but we couldn't. Dick said it didn't matter, nothing mattered. He said the police would come soon. We sat and waited for them; oh, how we waited, how long we waited. But they never came at all, though we sat and waited. It was dreadful . . . dreadful. After it was dark there was a light in the wood. We both saw it.

Dick said he would go and see what it was. He said perhaps it was the police. He said he must go, and he has never come back."

Keith moved to the door and stood there, staring out into the night. The wood showed only as a darker blur in the great blackness of the night, and as he stood and watched it he asked himself if some new tragedy had been added to those of which its silent groves and leafy trees had been a witness.

Pressing his hands to his throbbing temples he tried to think clearly, but all his numbed and wearied mind was conscious only of a heavy sensation of awe and an expectation of dreadful things to come. Reenie touched him softly on the arm.

"Why is Dick so long?" she asked piteously. "Why has he not come back?"

"So many never do, you see," he muttered. "That wood . . ."

"Do you think . . . is there danger?" she asked. "Is he in danger, do you think?"

"I don't know," he answered; "but he oughtn't to have gone there because he saw a light. I wouldn't go there after dark for any light, or anything else either."

"I asked him not to go," she murmured. "He wouldn't listen; he was not like himself; he was quite different." She sat down again on her stool. "He wouldn't listen to me; he would go," she said.

He brought a chair and sat down beside her. They hardly spoke again, and when dawn came they were still sitting there and still there had been no sign of Dick, no sign of him coming back from the wood. The wood had taken him, too, and he had not come back from it.

"We must get something to eat," Keith said. "It's very strange the police haven't been."

He prepared some food, but she would not eat, though she was glad of the cup of hot tea he made her. He wrote a note to the police authorities to say he had been anxiously expecting them and that Mr. Wentworth, whose disappearance had been reported to them, was lying dead, apparently murdered, in the wood near the house. He repeated with emphasis that he could not understand the inexplicable delay in taking notice of the previous report made to them by Mr. Wentworth's chauffeur, and he hoped that now they would act at once.

When he had written this he went back to where Reenie still sat, chin on hand, elbow on knee, and waited till there arrived in due course the boy who every morning brought them their milk from his father's farm. He seemed to understand something was seriously amiss, and promised with much excitement to take Keith's letter on his bicycle to the nearest police station.

This note sent off, it seemed to Keith there was

nothing else to do but wait, and he went back to Reenie, who had scarcely moved, but still sat at the kitchen door like a carven statue of despair.

"Dick has not come back," she said to him.

"No," he said, staring at the wood. "No."

"Do you think he ever will?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," he said; "yes, of course."

"I don't," she muttered. "I don't."

Keith felt himself shivering at her dull and ominous tone, and indeed the heavy menace of the wood oppressed him also almost beyond bearing, for in his heart he thought it likely that the fate that had overtaken the uncle had also overwhelmed the nephew.

"Have you the jewellery?" Reenie asked him once.

"No," he answered.

"Dick thinks you have," she said.

"I know, but he is wrong; he ought to be able to see that," Keith answered. He added as if to clinch the matter and make his honesty perfectly clear and plain: "I mean some day to marry Esme."

Even in her apathy she started at that.

"You!" she exclaimed, "oh, no, oh, no."

"I mean to," he repeated.

She did not speak again, but he saw her looking at him mistrustfully, and they watched and waited

again for a long time, till presently they heard the sound of a motor approaching by the road. Keith went round to the front of the house. The car had stopped, and two men who had descended from it were walking together up the hill. They were both in police uniform, and Keith went forward to meet them.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Police Arrive

He stood still and watched these two men coming towards him, waiting for them and thinking to himself that their advent meant in all probability ruin and disgrace for himself. Yet he did not see what else he could have done but summon their assistance. He had, however, a strong conviction that not a word of the extraordinary story he had to tell would be believed by them, and he was sure he would be suspected of the theft of the missing jewellery, perhaps even of being an accomplice in the murder of old Mr. Wentworth. In addition, too, to all that there would be, he still supposed, the likelihood of being arrested and charged on account of his affray with his late skipper and the constable that gentleman had summoned to his assistance.

It came to him that all his hopes and dreams of re-establishing his position in the world and winning Esme were for ever doomed; he saw very clearly that no chance remained to him.

His expression was not cheerful then, his manner not very confident or welcoming, as he stood and waited for the two police officials, and he felt instinctively that their first impression of him as they drew nearer was anything but favourable. Indeed, it is only truth to confess that his appearance at this moment was not prepossessing, for he had made little attempt to tidy himself after his long sleep in the chair in the kitchen and his originally ragged clothing had not been improved by his recent experiences.

It was, therefore, a tall gaunt figure, untidy, hollow-eyed, fierce and almost primæval-looking, that the two trim officials saw before them, and they exchanged a quick glance together; and one of them at least felt to see if the handcuffs in his pocket were ready for use.

This one seemed the senior of the two, and was in fact Detective-Inspector Wilks of the county police. He was a man of middle height and square build, with a curiously square impassive face that seemed as though made of wood, and conveyed at first sight an impression of dull stupidity that only the very alert and eager light-blue eyes contradicted. His companion was Detective-Sergeant Price, a tall, melancholy-looking man with a pale face, pale eyes, and an indeterminate moustache. He was considerably younger than his

companion, but he had already a high reputation for successful detective work, which he had earned not so much by any alertness or vigour of intellect as by the exercise of a tremendous and unwearying patience. He never tired and never gave up, and these are perhaps the greatest qualities a detective can have.

"Does Mr. Keith Norton live here?" demanded Inspector Wells of Keith in a somewhat rough and harsh voice and without any preliminary greeting.

"That is my name," answered Keith.

"Eh?" said the Inspector, very much surprised, for he could not at first reconcile Keith's letter, well written and well expressed and plainly that of an educated man, with his extraordinarily ragged and battered appearance. "Did you write this?" he asked, producing Keith's note.

"Yes," said Keith. "I have been expecting you ever since noon yesterday. Why didn't you come before?"

"This is the first we have heard," said Wilks. "Who is this Walters you talk about in your note? We have heard nothing of him."

"You haven't?" exclaimed Keith, very much surprised and somewhat doubtful. "But he went off yesterday in Mr. Wentworth's car straight to you. Do you mean he never got to you?"

"Your letter this morning was the first thing we

heard," repeated the Inspector. "I happened to be there on some other business when it arrived, so I came straight on to see what it meant. Do you say that a Mr. Wentworth has been murdered?"

"He is lying dead in Files Wood over there," answered Keith. "I think there is no doubt he has been murdered."

"Can you take us to the body?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know much about him. I saw him yesterday for the first time. But I understand he is a very wealthy and well-known business man."

"Have you any idea who committed the crime?"

Keith hesitated.

"I think I had better tell you the whole story from the beginning," he said. "It is both long and strange. I don't understand myself a good deal of what has happened. You had better come up to the house."

"Are you alone?"

"Except for a lady, who is the wife of Mr. Wentworth's nephew, Dick Wentworth."

"Where is he?" asked the Inspector sharply.

"I don't know," Keith answered. "He went into the wood late last night and he has not come back."

"Why didn't you come to us last night?" asked

Wilks. "After you had found Mr. Wentworth's body and knew something very serious had happened, why didn't you come to us yourself, instead of merely waiting for this Walters?"

"I was done up," answered Keith. "I had had a pretty bad time and I fell asleep in a chair and slept till midnight. When I woke Mrs. Wentworth was alone. She said Dick Wentworth had seen a light in the wood and had gone after it and had not returned. I could not leave her there alone and I was expecting you every minute. I never dreamed Walters might not have taken his message. I don't understand what can have prevented him. I thought the light in the wood they saw was perhaps your people."

The Inspector grunted and looked at his companion as if to ask him what he thought of a story that seemed perhaps all the more suspicious for being so plausible, and Price, almost imperceptibly elevating his eyebrows, managed to convey the impression that in his opinion it would be as well to arrest Keith on the spot. The Inspector was inclined to be of the same opinion, and it happened that deep in thought he kicked up the turf where they were standing with his heel.

"Hullo, what's the matter?" he exclaimed.

For Keith had turned deathly pale and he staggered as though he were about to fall. Instinctively

Price put out a hand to support him, but he recovered himself by an effort.

"Don't do that," he said in tones that were barely understandable.

"Do what? What do you mean?" asked the Inspector, puzzled and suspicious.

"It's the smell of damp earth; I can't stand the smell of earth," Keith muttered, pointing to the little hole Wilks had dug with his heel in the ground. "I am sorry," he added; "I am better now; I thought I was going to faint."

The Inspector looked at the Sergeant and the Sergeant looked at the Inspector, and both of them thought, and knew the other thought, that this was some deep trick of which the purpose was not yet apparent.

"Well, I think first of all," said Mr. Wilks, "you had better show us where Mr. Wentworth's body is lying, and then you can tell us all you know."

"Very well," answered Keith, "but I must tell Mrs. Wentworth you are here."

He led the way round the house, the two police officers watching him very closely all the time, to where Reenie was still sitting, chin on hand, elbow on knee, as she had sat almost without moving all through the long dark night and now in the bright warmth of the sun.

She looked up as they came near, but in a dull and indifferent manner.

"He has not come back," she said.

"Who do you mean, ma'am?" asked Wilks.

"My husband; he went into the wood last night and he has not come out again."

Wilks did not answer, but he glanced at Price again, and the Sergeant's thin lips formed inaudibly the word:

"Bunked."

"Well, ma'am, don't worry," said the Inspector briskly, "we'll soon find him for you; we are——"

He paused abruptly, for she had looked up at him, and he read in her eyes so deep and tragic a fear that his facile official assurance suddenly ceased.

"Oh, well," he said awkwardly.

"You see," she explained slowly and carefully, as one might speak to a little child, "you see, he went . . . and he has not come back again."

The Inspector rubbed his nose and glanced at the Sergeant, who this time made no response, but turned and looked at the green and shady depths of Files Wood as though wondering what was hidden there.

"We are going into the wood now," said Keith to her. "I hope we shall find him there all right."

I don't mean there is any danger for you, but I think you ought to go indoors and keep the place locked till we come back."

"I will wait here," she said.

"Have you a whistle?" Keith said to the Inspector, for her manner was not that of one open to argument. "If you have, I think you might give it her. Then, if Mrs. Wentworth needs help, she could blow it."

"What help could she need?" the Inspector asked.

"Strange things have happened," answered Keith sombrely.

The Inspector still looked doubtful, but gave Reenie his whistle as Keith had suggested, and then all three of them started towards the wood. As they approached it Keith thought he saw a movement behind a bush not far away and Price, who had sharp eyes, saw it, too.

"Some one watching us from behind there, I think, sir," he said.

Wilks whispered something, signed to Keith to follow, and they made from opposite directions a swift descent upon the bush. But when they got there they found nothing and no sign that any living thing had ever been there, and they both looked a trifle discomfited. Keith laughed grimly.

"It won't be so easy as all that," he said.

The others did not answer, and they went on again.

"What do you think has become of that lady's husband?" the Inspector asked after a moment or two.

"I don't know," Keith answered. "I have been nearly murdered in this wood myself, and Mr. Wentworth has met his death in it, and Dick Wentworth has never returned from it."

The Inspector looked at him sideways and very doubtfully.

"Who nearly murdered you?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Keith. They were not far from the spot where stood that great, prominent oak beneath which he had endured his agony. "Do you see that tree?" he said. "Under it I was attacked and near by my grave was dug."

"Well, you don't seem to have occupied it, yet," remarked the Inspector.

"Oh, yes, I have," answered Keith, and they both looked at him again in a very puzzled and doubtful manner, for they did not understand his words, and yet something in his tone and manner seemed to tell of what he had been through. "It is why I don't like the smell of damp earth," he explained.

"Oh," said Wilks, still more doubtfully and still more puzzled. "You might show us as we are so near," he remarked.

Somewhat reluctantly Keith led them to the spot.

"Do you mean there?" asked Wilks, pointing.
"Over there where that mound is?"

"Yes," said Keith; "it has been filled in. I suppose they thought it looked rather too suggestive as it was, and that they had better fill it up again."

"Who do you mean by 'they'?" asked the Inspector.

"I don't know," answered Keith. "I had better tell you everything from the start. Then you will know as much as I do, which isn't much. Only I thought you wanted to see Mr. Wentworth's body first of all?"

They went on again and came presently to where the body lay just as Keith had left it. It had not been touched, and the two police officers knelt down beside it. Their faces were grave now, for hitherto they had not been quite certain that Keith's story would not turn out to conceal some trick or fraud of some sort, or perhaps to be merely the ravings of a lunatic.

"He has been strangled with this handkerchief," the Inspector said at last. "Do you know whose it is?" he asked Keith. "It is marked 'R. W.'"

"It belongs to Dick Wentworth," Keith answered reluctantly. "The dead man's nephew and the husband of the lady we have just left."

CHAPTER XXIV

The Search

"I thought as much," said the Inspector, and he turned on Keith a slow gaze that said very plainly:

"Now, are you merely an accomplice—or are you the murderer yourself?"

"I think I had better tell you what I know," remarked Keith.

"Yes, yes," agreed the Inspector. "Yes. One thing. Do you think Richard Wentworth has done this?"

With a slight gesture of one hand he indicated the dead man, and Keith shook his head.

"Why not?" the Inspector asked.

"Well, I don't," Keith said.

"I see," answered the Inspector stolidly. "Well, please tell us everything you know about this business. Cut it as short as you can, but don't leave anything out. Oh, and begin at the beginning."

Obedying these instructions as well as he could, Keith told his story and the two officials listened impassively, the Sergeant taking notes in shorthand

the while. It was a long and involved story, though Keith told it as briefly as he could, and during it he saw more than once Inspector and Sergeant exchange swift, incredulous glances.

When he had finished there was silence for a little, broken soon by the hooting of a motor horn at a little distance.

"I expect that's Captain Wallace," said the Inspector. "I sent a copy of your note to him," he explained to Keith, "and he has come on. We had better go and meet him and see what action he thinks ought to be taken."

They left the body lying where it was till arrangements could be made for its removal, and retraced their steps through the wood till they came out near the house where the new-comer, Captain Wallace, the chief constable of the county, had just arrived. He was a tall, military-looking man, with a bronzed face, and a very quick, brisk, authoritative manner, and he was a good organizer and disciplinarian with, however, very little idea of or experience in detective work. Keith noticed that he had brought three constables with him, and Inspector Wilks, telling Keith to wait a little apart, went forward and engaged in a long talk with his superior. Then they went together to Reenie and asked her a number of questions. She answered very reluctantly and indifferently, but that served

to confirm Keith's story in some of its details. Sergeant Price had vanished from the scene, but two of the stalwart constables kept always very near to Keith and watched him closely, so that he felt he was already practically a prisoner. After a time Captain Wallace and Inspector Wilks came back to Keith, and the Captain said:

"The Inspector has repeated your extraordinary story to me, and, frankly, I am not very much inclined to believe it. It may be true——"

"Thank you for thinking so," interposed Keith, whose mood was beginning to grow angry and reckless.

"—but we require some proof," continued the Captain, frowning at the interruption. "As I understand it, you say the murder of Mr. Wentworth has been committed by some being of which you give no description and have no certain knowledge but believe to inhabit this wood. I must say that, on the face of it, it appears more likely that the criminal is the disinherited nephew you tell us about. I am afraid I must add there appears to be reasonable suspicion that you have acted as his accomplice."

"Am I under arrest?" inquired Keith.

"No," said the Captain, "no, not at present, unless you make it necessary for us to take that step."

"I see," said Keith, "you mean I am really but

that you wish to avoid the responsibility of formal action."

This was so palpable a hit that the Captain looked slightly taken aback and hesitated.

"Young man," said the Inspector severely, "you are in a very serious position, and you will not do yourself any good by adopting that sort of tone. You had better realize that."

"My dear sir," retorted Keith, "I am in so serious a position that I care very little what tone I adopt or whether I do myself any good or not."

"That will do," interposed Captain Wallace sharply. "I don't think, Mr. Norton, that I am justified in placing you under arrest at this moment, but my opinion may change—and will change if you do not give us every assistance in your power."

"It was in order to do so that I sent for you," remarked Keith. "Permit me to remark that if I were a guilty man I could have placed myself beyond reach of pursuit long before what has happened could have been discovered."

"We are not forgetting that you sent for us," said Captain Wallace. "We are taking that fact into full consideration. But there has been a long delay. You say the responsibility for that rests with Mr. Wentworth's chauffeur. We are endeavouring to get in touch with him now so as to hear what he has to say, and if his story confirms yours that will

be a great point in your favour. At present we are waiting till we can find him and Mr. Richard Wentworth. You can give us no hint where Richard Wentworth is likely to be?"

"I do not think that he is far away," said Keith, glancing over his shoulder at the quiet, green depths of the wood.

"You mean . . .?" asked the Captain and paused.

"Yes, I do," answered Keith. "He is either there or he has bolted. I don't think he has bolted, somehow. But there is some one else you want to find. Bert Wentworth, the man I told you about who came to the house and who planned and helped in the attack on me in File's Wood."

"Quite so," agreed the Captain. "We shall find him in time if he is in England. Your theory is that he is the guilty person?"

"Yes, though perhaps not actually in person," answered Keith. "My belief is that he has an agent, an associate of some sort, perhaps a Hottentot or some one like that he brought back from South Africa. I believe that is the creature who made the attack on me and who murdered old Mr. Wentworth—at Bert Wentworth's instigation."

"What object," asked the Captain, "could Bert Wentworth have in murdering his step-father at the very moment when the old man had quarrelled with

his nephew so that presumably there would be a chance for him to effect a reconciliation?"

"I don't think there would have been any chance of that," answered Keith. "I don't think old Mr. Wentworth was that sort. But if he were dead and Dick Wentworth hanged for the murder, Bert Wentworth would inherit everything, I understand, provided the old man died intestate. And he had just burned his will."

Captain Wallace pursed his lips into a whistle, but no sound came, and the Inspector looked very grave. They drew aside to consult a little, and then told Keith to wait at the house—one of the constables stayed with him—while they and the other two policemen went to where the murdered man's body still lay.

They took with them a rough stretcher they had made of poles and sacking and brought back the body, which they placed in the dining-room on a couch hastily prepared for it. Before long a doctor they had sent for appeared and made an examination that revealed nothing new, and afterwards Sergeant Price reappeared with a following of about a dozen men.

"I am going to make a thorough search of the wood from end to end," Captain Wallace said to Keith. "If there is any truth in your theory that some Hottentot or other being has been living in

it for the last three or four weeks, we shall certainly find some trace or another of him."

Keith agreed that that was certain, and the little army started out. They were well provided with ropes, sticks, and other appliances, and they proceeded to make a thorough, systematic, and very complete search of the wood from one end of it to the other, till every bush and corner, every patch of bracken or high grass, every rabbit's burrow or rat's hole, had been minutely examined, not one square inch escaping.

It was late when their task was completed, and they found themselves at the farther end of the wood, hot, weary, and by no means in a good temper, for they had seen nothing, found nothing, discovered no faintest corroboration of Keith's theories.

"Well, Mr. Norton, what do you say now?" Captain Wallace said to him.

"I can say no more than I have already," answered Keith shortly.

The Captain looked at him and was more than half inclined to order his arrest on the spot. Now that his story appeared to be proved untrue in one of its most important details, the Captain was inclined to suppose that all the rest was invented also. For that if any living creature, such as Keith described, had inhabited the wood for any

length of time he must have left plain traces of his sojourn appeared certain to them all.

"Certainly no one has been using this wood as a hiding place," he declared, "and it is equally certain that Mr. Richard Wentworth is not in it, alive or dead. I think we may be sure of that also. He could not have avoided us living, and we must have found him dead. I am afraid a warrant will have to be issued for his arrest."

Keith did not answer, for he himself was puzzled and disappointed by the total failure of their great drive. They turned back through the wood, and as they came to that huge and prominent oak where he had suffered so much, and where their search had been this day especially close, Captain Wallace stopped and asked Keith one or two sharp questions, as if to find out whether he still adhered to his previous story.

"You say you were actually pushed into the grave dug for you?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Keith in a low voice, for there were times still when the memory of those dreadful moments seemed to grip him with fresh and awful terror, terror so great he had sometimes a fear that his very brain would reel before it and be overthrown.

Captain Wallace looked curiously at him, and

then at the mound of fresh dug earth that marked the spot where the grave had been.

"It has been filled in again," he remarked.

"Looked a bit suggestive, I suppose, sir," said the Inspector.

"I was just thinking," said the Captain, "it might have served as a convenient hiding place—those missing jewels perhaps. Or even a cigarette end or a scrap of paper or anything. I think we might have the earth removed again just to make sure there is nothing there."

"Very good, sir," said the Inspector.

He gave some orders accordingly, and two or three of the men set to work, and it was not long before they uncovered the swollen, blackened features of dead Dick Wentworth.

CHAPTER XXV

File's Wood at Night

It was late now, and under the trees the shadows were beginning to grow long and dark as the night came swiftly down upon the land. One of the men had a lantern and he lighted it, and by its dim rays the earth was cleared away from this new victim and his body gently raised and placed upon the ground near by. Instinctively the bystanders removed their hats, and by the side of the dead man knelt Captain Wallace and Inspector Wilks, making a hasty examination that revealed no more than was already patent, that death had been caused by strangulation.

A stretcher was improvised and the body placed on it, and in the darkness that was now nearly complete a little procession formed, the man with the lantern going first, the stretcher-bearers with their burden coming next, and then the rest of the party, the rear being brought up by Captain Wallace and Inspector Wilks, who were deep in consultation together over this new development.

No one took any notice of Keith, who for the moment thought himself forgotten. But he followed with the rest, and all at once was surprised to find Sergeant Price by his side.

"I dare say I was mistaken," said the Sergeant apologetically, "but I thought I heard something moving over there." He nodded towards their left. "Likely it was a rabbit or something," he said; "there was nothing when I went."

Keith turned and looked intently in the direction indicated, and then glanced towards the Captain. He was on the point of suggesting that another general search should be made, but reflected that when they had failed so utterly in the broad daylight, how could they hope to succeed in this dense, baffling darkness? The Sergeant had seen his movement and said again:

"There was nothing there. I expect it was just my fancy."

Keith did not answer, for he was not so sure of that, and then Captain Wallace came towards them and the Sergeant discreetly faded away.

"This is a terrible business, Mr. Norton," the Captain said to him in a tone more friendly than any he had used hitherto, "but at any rate it appears to confirm very markedly what you have told us. I must say that I was inclined to suspect young Mr. Wentworth of being his uncle's murderer, but

now I am inclined to agree with you that the stepson is more likely to be the guilty person. We must set to work to find him. But, to speak frankly, it is just as well that Mrs. Wentworth can prove you were sleeping in the house when her husband left it and that you remained there after you woke. Otherwise . . .”

“Otherwise I might be in some danger of the gallows,” Keith completed the sentence.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” exclaimed the Captain. “No, no. But there would have been unpleasant suspicions to face, and you might have been exposed to a good deal of annoyance and inconvenience. Now I want to ask you one or two questions. This jewellery you found and that vanished afterwards, what do you think became of that?”

“Stolen,” answered Keith, “by the same man or creature, or whatever it is, that has been lurking in this wood so long, that may very likely be watching us at this moment.”

“Surely not,” protested the Captain; “surely you can’t still believe any one is in the wood after the way we have beaten it from one end to the other?”

“You certainly made a very thorough search,” agreed Keith; “all the same. . . .”

“Quite impossible,” declared the Captain with

emphasis. "Another thing, the young lady you speak of as Mrs. Wentworth's sister? I understand she is staying not far from here."

"Yes," answered Keith. "I don't know what the place is called, but I know my way to it."

"I think it would be as well if you went over at once and brought her here," said the Captain. "You will understand from my making the suggestion that I am quite convinced of your innocence, but I shall have to ask you to take Sergeant Price and one of our men with you, and I want you to promise to say nothing to her, nothing at all, of what has happened today. I wish to hear her story myself. That is partly why I am sending for her, but also if she is Mrs. Wentworth's sister it will be as well for her to be here. Mrs. Wentworth is quite alone, and she ought to have another woman with her. As soon as you can get the sister here I shall send them off together in the car to a place where they can be put up for the night till their friends can be communicated with. It isn't fit for Mrs. Wentworth to stay here any longer than can be helped."

"You know Miss Esme has lost her memory owing to an attack made on her in the wood?" asked Keith.

"I understood so from what Wilks said you told him," answered the Captain. "That is the worst of

this case, there are so many side complications like this young lady's loss of memory and the disappearance of Mr. Wentworth's chauffeur. But I hope the sight of young Mrs. Wentworth may help to restore her sister's memory, and in any case she should be able to give us useful information. How long will it take you to get there and back?"

"It is about two hours' walk," answered Keith, "or a little more."

"You must walk, I am afraid," said the Captain. "I can't spare you a car; they are both in use. There is a lot to arrange. You had better get something to eat, and then you and Price can start. Can you be back before midnight?"

"I think so," answered Keith. "Oh, yes, quite easily."

"Good," said the Captain. "I will tell Price to be ready, and now I want as exact and close a description of the man you believe to be Bert Wentworth as you can give me. Unfortunately, Mrs. Wentworth has never met him."

Keith gave as accurate and detailed a description as he could of the man he had twice seen, and the Captain thanked him and went to speak to Wilks. There was much to do, much to arrange and see about, and the two officials became immersed in the reports they were making and the plans they were laying for the pursuit of the suspected persons.

Keith managed to find some food in the kitchen and ate it there. Reenie had disappeared. She had been asked to identify the body of her dead husband and was now alone in one of the upper rooms, lying on the bed in a stupor of grief and fatigue. While Keith was still satisfying his appetite Price came in and announced that he was to accompany him alone.

"There are such a lot of messages going off," he said, "and one thing and another to be seen to, they can't spare another of our chaps."

Keith made no remark. He would have preferred to go alone, but as that was not to be he did not mind whether he had one companion or two.

"A terrible lot to do in these cases," Price went on and sighed with heart-felt gratitude. "Thank the Lord," he said, "the papers haven't got hold of it yet. But they will soon. Tomorrow there will be a dozen journalists poking their noses into everything and worrying you out of your seven senses." He paused, and his countenance relaxed momentarily. "Not but what they are liberal enough with their cigars," he admitted. "Last time I was in a big case—and it was a kindergarten affair to this—I got smokes enough to last me nearly six weeks. Good ones, too. But I earned 'em all with the worry and the trouble I had."

He seemed in a chatty and friendly mood, but

Keith did not respond very freely. He was in no temper for talk, and besides he had a strong feeling that the Sergeant had been told to try to draw him out. So he scarcely made any answer, and as soon as he had finished his meal he rose to his feet and suggested that they should start.

The night was very dark, for the moon had not yet risen, but the Sergeant had provided himself with a powerful electric torch with which he sometimes lighted up their path. Their way led them at first through Files Wood, and the Sergeant, who still seemed inclined to chat, in spite of Keith's failure to respond, remarked that a good many of the men who had helped in the search that afternoon seemed very frightened of the place.

"One of them," remarked the Sergeant, "told me he wouldn't go through it at night for a hundred pounds. Seemed to think the devil visited it after dark."

"I don't know that he was far wrong there," observed Keith grimly.

"Oh," the Sergeant explained, "but he meant a real devil."

"So do I," said Keith, "very real."

"Well," declared the Sergeant jovially, "if I see him I'll soon clap the handbolts on him. It would be a big capture, wouldn't it?"

"It would," agreed Keith, and as they went farther into the wood the Sergeant fell silent.

It was very silent, very still, in the dark night under the heavy branches of the trees and where the bushes grew thick and close. Once or twice the Sergeant sent the strong beam of his electric torch questing through the darkness; once or twice they halted, imagining they had heard some sound; once they both had the impression that they heard footsteps behind them.

But when they stopped to listen they heard nothing, the silence lay around like a thing that could be felt, the darkness was as a huge mantle laid upon the earth. It seemed as if even the usual small murmurs of the night were hushed and that of the little timid creatures that venture out in the friendly dark, and make a general whispering and rustling in it as they go to and fro about their business, not one was now abroad. Perhaps the noisy hunt that had passed through the wood that day had driven them from their usual haunts and they had not yet returned. At any rate, whatever the cause, the quietness and stillness of the night made now an utter silence in which it seemed even the falling of a leaf must be heard distinctly, and the Sergeant muttered in Keith's ear:

"What a place; how quiet it is."

"Yes, very quiet," agreed Keith, for this impression of an unnatural stillness was strong upon him also.

Instinctively they paused, and they both had the same idea that this utter stillness was made up of innumerable hostile and malign forces all waiting, all listening, all preparing.

"Don't wonder," muttered the Sergeant, wiping his forehead, "don't wonder as there's some won't come through here for a hundred pounds."

And his tone implied that henceforth he also was of that mind.

"Hush," muttered Keith, "hush."

It was not that he thought he heard anything, but he had the idea that if they made even the slightest sound in the midst of this immense silence that surrounded them they placed themselves somehow at a disadvantage.

They stood there side by side, and it was to them as though the silence and the stillness grew more intense each moment. But now with that great silence there grew slowly into Keith's consciousness a knowledge, a certainty, that somewhere near at hand there was some one living, some one breathing, some one in awful and horrid peril.

No sound reached his ear, he could see nothing in the black darkness around, but all of it together, the silence, the stillness, the darkness, made up one

wild cry of help that he felt in every fibre of his being and responded to utterly.

Yet whence it came, this mute appeal, or from whom, he had no idea, only it was as though all the night were composed of it alone.

And it seemed almost as though Sergeant Price had something of the same feeling, for he put his lips to Keith's ear and whispered, almost inaudibly:

"The devil's loose round here tonight."

The silent appeal, the unuttered cry, that pulsed all through the night grew more urgent, stronger, then ceased suddenly, and once more they were alone in a quiet, dark wood, late at night, and that was all.

"Lord love me," muttered Price and wiped his face on which the perspiration streamed, "what was that, what was all that?"

"Give me your torch," Keith said.

Instead of obeying Price switched it on himself and flung its beam like a great sword of light on the shadows around.

It showed only some bracken, a bush or two, leaves and branches, all shining and silver in the clear light, and nothing else at all.

"More to the left, the left," said Keith sharply, and yet why he said this he did not know.

The Sergeant swung the light carelessly round,

and as it passed it showed for a moment on the pale, death-like face of Esme, unconscious as it seemed, framed in loose, streaming hair, and borne on the shoulders of some dark, crouching, indistinguishable form that in a moment instantly vanished away with her into the darkness and was no more seen.

CHAPTER XXVI

Tree Tops

Keith shouted at the very top of his voice and very wildly and sprang forward, and behind him ran the Sergeant, throwing in front of them as they went the white ray of his torch that stabbed, as it were, far into the darkness with its long beam of light.

Before them they saw, sometimes in the revealing beam of the electric torch, sometimes avoiding it and slipping away from it into the surrounding darkness, the strange, crouching, running figure they pursued, bending nearly double beneath the weight of the pale girl upon its back, running with an extraordinary rapidity, avoiding as though by magic all those obstacles of tangled bushes, spreading roots, outstretched branches, that hindered so much the two pursuers, twisting away into the night like a hunted fox that doubled on its tracks each time the questing ray of light came too near.

But for the help they had from that leaping light

the fugitive would certainly have escaped into the gloom of the forest, with his helpless burden, for it seemed that darkness was to him no hindrance at all, and that he ran in it as surely and as swiftly as in the full light of noon.

From behind as he ran on Keith heard a perpetual whistling, and he realized that Sergeant Price was calling for help that would soon come to them. But it daunted him, and made him strangely afraid, that the strange being they pursued seemed so sure and confident of escape he would not put down his captive, but still ran and raced through the night under the weight of her unconscious form.

Keith caught his foot in some obstacle and fell, but in a moment was on his feet again, and he saw a little ahead, clearly outlined in the bright ray of the electric torch, a group of trees taller than their neighbours, standing apart as in a little grove, and running towards them a crouched grotesque form that seemed neither animal nor human but that bent beneath the weight of Esme, whose pale, death-like face and streaming hair Keith could plainly see.

The next instant the light vanished and a darkness, blacker, deeper, more confusing, because of the lost light, fell around. In it Keith, rushing on, ran against the trunk of a tree and was flung back heavily.

"The light, the light," he shouted to Price at the top of his voice.

"Battery's run down," answered briefly the Sergeant from out of the darkness somewhere behind.

Something like despair came upon Keith, for indeed the fugitive had seemed to keep well ahead of them even when they had the assistance of the light, and what chance of success had they now that the darkness was an impenetrable veil all around?

But he ran on, making instinctively for that grove of tall trees he had seen for an instant before the light failed; and from behind the Sergeant's whistle shrilled insistently. He fell and was on his feet again at once, he stumbled and recovered himself, and running on found he was in the midst of that grove near which the light had shown for a moment crouching fugitive and pale captive borne away. He had to slacken pace a little, for the tree trunks seemed to oppose him everywhere like a barrier to hold him back, but at last he was through them, and he was about to increase his speed and rush blindly on when all at once he halted suddenly. Why he did so he did not know, but he stood still as abruptly as though a hand had been laid upon him to restrain him.

He stooped down and picked up a small stone his fingers touched and tossed it before him and

listened. There was an appreciable interval before the sound of its fall came back to him, and he knew then where he was—on the edge of a steep, rocky hollow twenty or thirty feet deep and with precipitous rocky sides. He remembered it well, for the bottom of this hollow, thickly overgrown, had been searched with especial care that afternoon during Captain Wallace's great drive through the wood, since it had seemed a likely spot to be chosen for a hiding place. But nothing had been found there, and Keith remembered now that above the hollow, at the spot where it fell away so precipitously, he had noticed a grove of tall, wide-branched trees, evidently those by which he was now standing.

Another step or two forward would have hurled him over the edge to a fall a sheer twenty feet or more, and he heard the heavy step of the Sergeant coming quickly behind.

"Careful, be careful," he called, wondering if it was in the hope of entrapping them here that the fugitive had led them this way; "there is a twenty-foot drop, mind where you are going."

"Here's the girl," the Sergeant answered.

"What? Where?" Keith cried, and ran in the direction whence the Sergeant's voice seemed to come.

In a moment or two he came to him and found

him kneeling on the ground by Esme's unconscious form.

Keith had some matches in his pocket and he struck one. She did not seem hurt in any way, but she was in a deep swoon, and though he rubbed her hands gently between his and called her name he could not rouse her.

"Blow your whistle," he said to Price; "blow your whistle again."

The Sergeant obeyed.

"They're coming," he said. "This is a rum go. Wonder what's become of him? I suppose he found her getting too heavy and us too close behind, and so he dropped her to be able to get away quicker."

"Yes," said Keith, "yes, I expect so. Yes. Perhaps he meant to come back again."

"Shouldn't wonder," agreed the Sergeant; "it was only good luck we came across her, and if we had gone on without seeing her he might have slipped back to get her again."

"Yes," said Keith again. "Yes."

He was thinking quickly and deeply. It seemed strange to him that Esme had been abandoned just at the moment when the failure of the Sergeant's torch had made escape so much easier. With a shiver of horror he reflected that if they had hurried on in pursuit without finding her she would

have been left lying on the ground quite unprotected. Suppose that nameless, formless creature he had seen now three several times, but never clearly enough to identify, had not continued its flight, but was lurking somewhere near? Suppose this abandonment of Esme had been a device adopted in the hope that the pursuit would pass on and that then there would be opportunity to remove her to the secret hiding place Keith was persuaded existed somewhere near?

Price blew his whistle once again, and this time there was an answer. "They're coming," he said.

But Keith was not listening. He was staring up at the darkness above, made so much more intense by the tangle of overhanging branches beneath which they stood.

"When you were a boy, did you ever go bird-nesting?" he said to the Sergeant.

"Eh, what's that? What do you mean?" asked Price.

"I mean I'm glad I was a sailor once," answered Keith.

He caught hold of a branch above his head and swung himself up.

"What's the matter? What are you doing?" the Sergeant cried.

"You stay where you are and look after Miss Esme and keep your wits about you," answered

Keith from over his head. "Don't leave her whatever you do. I'm going bird-nesting."

"Well, I'm jiggered," muttered the Sergeant.

Keith took hold of another branch and pulled himself up. It was difficult, chancy work in that confusing darkness, but he was cautious and agile, and he made sure of his holds and of his footing before he trusted himself to them. His eyes, too, were growing more accustomed to the dark.

Up and up he went till he was nearly at the top, and then he paused and looked round from his lofty perch. Above him there was nothing but the stars and the drifting clouds, and the night breeze blew softly by. At a distance he saw lights moving on the ground—those of the party coming to their help, he hoped—and he saw lights, too, burning in the windows of the house. Elsewhere, around him and beneath, he looked upon a vast, impenetrable sea of darkness in which nothing was discernible, nothing could be distinguished, save here and there a tree top so much taller than the others that it showed against the sky. For a moment he remained motionless, looking down on that enormous darkness and thinking of all that it had seen and hidden, and he listened intently but without hearing anything. Very cautiously he began his descent.

He remembered a stout and strong branch he

had passed on his upward climb, and when he came to it again he made his way carefully along it. As he had hoped it would, it reached almost to the next tree, and groping in the darkness he found a branch thrusting out from this second tree, by means of which he could swing himself into it.

That, too, he climbed slowly and carefully in the dark till he reached almost to the top, and then he descended with equal caution. From this tree also, by the aid of interlocking branches, it was possible, though the operation was difficult and dangerous enough in that heavy darkness, to get to the next tree, and he began to realize that all these trees grew so close together, and were so joined by entwined branches, it would almost certainly be possible to pass from one to another through the whole grove without touching ground.

"Might be handy, that," he mused as from this third tree he clambered to a fourth, and as he swung himself from branch to branch he heard a faint, cautious sound very close to him and felt a branch on which he had just laid a hand quiver faintly as though some weight or pressure had just been carefully withdrawn.

He knew then for certain that he had come to the heart of the mystery and that in this tree, swinging half way between earth and sky, he was not alone.

CHAPTER XXVII

A Strange Nest

At that moment he would have given all he possessed for one gleam or glimmer of light; and while he still peered into the darkness through the leafy branches where he crouched, and while he still felt the sinister quivering of that branch on which he had just laid his hand, he received a tremendous blow on the side.

Perched insecurely in mid air as he was he lost his balance and fell, and for one moment thought that all was over as he dropped through space. But his desperate clutching hands caught a thin branch that bent beneath his weight but still held, so that he hung from it by his arms, his feet dangling in the air. He swung them up and they rested on another, stronger branch, and in an instant he had hauled himself into safety. Looking upwards, as he felt himself secure again, he saw above him, against the darkness of the sky through a gap in the widespread branches, a shapeless, crouching form clinging there like some foul and

monstrous bird of night and peering down as if to see what had become of him.

The sight recalled to him all his energy and sent the blood pulsing once more through his veins with fiercest energy. He forgot his late narrow escape, he forgot dangers and risks, he forgot entirely all warnings of prudence and caution, he was conscious only of the one desire to lay his hands upon this abominable creature that once more had nearly wrought his death, and almost literally he leaped upwards through the tree from branch to branch.

Dense as was the darkness, one might almost have thought that he could see in it, so surely did he go, so certainly did his hands appear to find the best holds, with such perfect skill did his feet move from one precarious support to another.

The creature above saw and heard him coming, and with an almost inconceivable agility swung away, and with an activity fully as extraordinary Keith swung after it. It leaped in the dark from branch to branch, and in the darkness from branch to branch he followed. It ran up a tree trunk so slender that the tree bent beneath its weight, and Keith was close behind, so that the tree bent further still. It leaped across a wide gap to another, sturdier tree, and Keith launched himself after through the night, knowing not whither his spring was taking him, but somehow or another finding

himself safely clinging to a branch that still quivered from the impact of the creature he pursued.

Down below Sergeant Price was shouting like a madman and blowing his whistle with all the breath he could spare, for the tumult in the trees above was as though a dozen demons fought there between earth and sky. From a distance there answered him shouting and the sound of men running as Captain Wallace and others of the police came hurrying to their help; and far above in the dark night there was still the sound of breaking branches and of torn twigs and leaves showering down as the trees swung and swayed beneath the strain of that strange wild contest of the air.

From one branch above his head a dark form dropped so close to the Sergeant he might have laid hands upon him had he been more alert. But in a moment it was gone, running up the trunk of the nearest tree like a gigantic squirrel, and after it came Keith not more than six feet behind, and as agile, swift and fierce as the thing that he pursued.

Almost at once as it seemed they were in mid air again, swinging from branch to branch, clinging to tree trunks, leaping across gaps, climbing with perfect certainty of hand and foot in that pitchy darkness where the slightest slip or miscalculation meant death and where even in the daylight slip

or miscalculation must have seemed inevitable.

But perhaps the darkness helped them both, and had they seen and realized the things they did, the wild risks they took, the mad leaps they made, the way they swayed and balanced themselves thirty feet up where a bird could scarce have found a footing, the end would have come before it did.

From one tree to another they passed, and all Keith's innermost being was hot and fierce with exultation as he felt himself the master of his enemy and that in this wild chase he gained. He was so close now he had twice been able to touch the fugitive; he could hear it muttering and chattering to itself like no human being, but with a note of terror in its voice; and he felt well assured that very soon he would be able to lay hold upon it. He had indeed leaped down on the same branch as that on which the fugitive had just alighted when there came all at once a very bright, clear beam of light questing and seeking through the thick branches and spreading, leafy twigs. It showed him, chock by jowl with him, a squat, monstrous, hairy form with long arms held out to seize the next branch above their heads and next flashed straight into his own eyes, dazzling him and confusing and blinding him so utterly that he missed his hold, missed his footing, lost balance and fell. Luckily the tree limb next beneath broke his fall to some

extent, but it was not strong enough to bear the impact of his weight and it smashed off close to the trunk. He fell with it to the ground, but he was not hurt, though for the moment he lay still, dazed and half unconscious, while half a dozen lamps and lanterns concentrated their rays upon him.

"Who is it? Who is it?" shouted a voice.

"You fools, he'll get away," shouted Keith, lifting himself on one arm by a great effort. "Quick, quick, he's up there somewhere; get all round, cut him off, quick."

He heard a voice giving sharp orders and men scattering to obey. Some one bent over him and a voice he recognized as that of Inspector Wilks said:

"Are you hurt?"

"No," said Keith; "don't let him get away."

"Oh, he won't," asserted Wilks encouragingly; "our men are all round."

"Where is the Sergeant? Is Esme safe?" he asked.

"Yes, the young lady is all right," answered Price for himself. "Good lord, what was it up there?"

"I don't know," answered Keith.

"I never heard the like," the Sergeant said; "it was like a dozen madmen given wings and playing hide and seek up there."

"I should have had him in another minute," Keith said, "but that light dazzled me."

All round now lights were showing from lamps and electric torches, so that about the grove was drawn a circle of illumination, while other lights flashed upon each tree in turn and voices shouted excitedly:

"He's here, he's there, look, look, he's gone."

"He'll get away," Keith said again; and he jumped up and ran to where at the foot of one of the trees, two or three men were pointing upwards and throwing aloft the beam of a powerful lantern.

"There's something there," one was saying; "I can see something plainly."

"It does not move," said another; "it is only a bird's nest."

"A big nest," said the first man; "that's no nest."

"I'll try a shot," said Captain Wallace, who was near at hand.

He had a small automatic pistol and he fired two shots at the dark object that could be just barely discerned about twenty feet above their heads in the branches of the great tree at whose foot they stood.

The shots had no effect, and Keith said:

"I'll go up."

Without waiting for an answer he swung himself into the tree. The climb was not difficult, for the

branches were strong and grew close together, and soon he reached the object they had seen from below. He found it to be an ingenious and elaborate platform, or indeed kind of a huge nest, formed of small branches and twigs woven between stronger ones and strengthened further by a rope twined in and out and made secure to the tree's trunk.

This strange eyrie was about nine feet long by perhaps four wide and stretched on both sides of the trunk which formed its main support. The sides were protected by more rope, so that one could lie and sleep there in perfect security twenty feet above the earth. Overhead, the thick foliage of the tree formed a shelter that only the heaviest rain would be likely to penetrate. At one end two blankets were lying in a heap, and there were three or four pockets or hanging bags ingeniously made out of woven grass. In these were stored two dead rabbits that had been recently killed, some raw turnips and some fruit. Into another of these woven bags had been stuffed a quantity of rubbish, such as nut shells, egg shells, fruit skins and so on. Evidently the habitant of this place had been accustomed to remove with care all such waste matter lest its presence on the ground below might have given a clue to the position of his arboreal dwelling.

Keith tested the platform and found it quite strong and secure, and standing on it and leaning over its edge he shouted down:

"There is a place up here where some one has been living."

"Living?" a voice repeated. "How? Where? What do you mean?"

"Come and see," Keith answered; "it's a kind of tree shelter; there are blankets here and food."

He heard sounds of climbing, and presently Captain Wallace and another man appeared clambering cautiously up through the dark. They examined the eyrie very carefully, and with many muttered exclamations of astonishment and wonder.

"What a place," Captain Wallace said. "I expect the fellow was snug here all the time we were hunting for him down below. I have heard of people living in caves and ditches, but tree tops . . ."

"One might be very snug up here," said Keith. "It is strongly made and wouldn't be at all uncomfortable. Of course it would only do for summer. In winter it would be spotted at once."

They climbed down again, the Captain deciding that this human nest must be left as it was till morning. Inspector Wilks came up to them as they reached the ground.

"There's no one in any of the other trees, sir," he said; "they have all been searched."

"Well, we have found his little home anyhow," remarked the Captain.

But the occupant of that strange dwelling had made good his escape, for it was certain that he was no longer anywhere within the circle that had been drawn about the grove. The only clue to the manner of his escape came from one of the men who had been stationed at the edge of the hollow where it sloped down so precipitously and where Keith had so narrowly escaped falling. This man declared, like all the others, that he had seen and heard nothing and that nothing could by any possibility have got by him. Throwing the light of the lantern he held down the steep, almost sheer rocky drop of more than twenty feet he repeated:

"No one could get down there in the dark, could they, now? Rum thing, though, I heard some rabbits playing in the bushes at the bottom, so I threw a stone at them to make them be quiet."

"Rabbits," repeated Keith angrily, "rabbits at this time—that was him making his escape."

CHAPTER XXVIII

The House Roof

Since in that great darkness and vast tangle of trees pursuit was plainly useless, it was settled that nothing more should be attempted till daylight, though two men were to be left on guard to see that the strange eyrie Keith had discovered was not destroyed or damaged in any way.

"Not that our friend of the tree tops is likely to turn here," observed Captain Wallace, "though he won't dodge us for long whatever he does. I shall have every man in the force on the look out for him tomorrow morning first thing. He hasn't a chance of getting away."

Keith was not so optimistic, but at any rate he did not see what else could be done for the moment and he was besides busily occupied in trying to patch up his clothing and his skin, both of which had suffered severely during his wild climb through the trees. For the first time Captain Wallace noticed his condition by the rays of a lantern a man

was holding near, and uttered a loud exclamation.

"Good heavens, what a state you are in," he cried.

"One doesn't go climbing in the dark for nothing," answered Keith.

He was in fact nearly naked, for two-thirds of his clothing he had left in the trees above and the remaining third hung about him in ribbons, and as for his skin there was hardly a square inch that was not scratched and bleeding. Fortunately none of his wounds was serious, but he had lost a fair amount of blood, and he was so stiff and sore he could hardly stand. One man lent him a coat and another a piece of sacking, and another was directed to give him his arm to support him as he walked.

Esme was still unconscious, and she was borne along on a stretcher hastily improvised from coats and branches. A messenger had already been sent off on a bicycle for a doctor, and when the little procession got back again to the house the burly policeman who had been left on guard came forward quickly.

"A gentleman's here, sir," he said to the Captain. "Said he was particular anxious to see you, sir, but he wouldn't give his name."

"Where is he?" asked the Captain, wondering who this late visitor might be.

"In the drawing-room, sir," answered the constable.

"I'll see what he wants at once," said the Captain. "Wilks, put the lady down on one of the beds upstairs and wait till the doctor comes. See if you can rouse Mrs. Wentworth and tell her we think her sister is here and then come to me in the drawing-room."

As he spoke he opened the drawing-room door and entered, and came out again at once.

"There is no one there," he said sharply to the constable.

The man looked very blank.

"He said he would wait there, sir," he protested, "and he hasn't left the house, I'll swear to that, for I've been standing here all the time."

"Well, he isn't there now," answered the Captain; "he must have slipped out the back way. I wonder what the fellow came for?"

He was evidently a good deal disturbed, and he was still more worried when a brief investigation showed that all the doors and windows were securely locked on the inside.

"But that's absurd," exclaimed the Captain irritably. "I never heard of such a case as this, one mad impossible thing after another. Is he hiding in a cupboard or under a bed or something? He must have gone again without your seeing

him," he added to the policeman who had been on duty.

But the man insisted respectfully but very emphatically that that was quite impossible, and the Captain repeated:

"Well, then, where is he? What on earth can the fellow have wanted, coming at such an hour and then vanishing like this?"

But an idea had come to Keith, and he said to the policeman:

"Was this man tall with very long arms and legs that seemed too long for him to manage, and did his face look all skin and bone?"

"Yes, he was like that," agreed the man, and Keith turned excitedly to Captain Wallace.

"It was Bert Wentworth!" he cried; "the man at the bottom of the whole thing."

"Bert Wentworth," repeated Captain Wallace, looking more and more bewildered; "but, good heavens, what should he come here for? And if he did, why should he slip off again? And how could he without being seen? It's—it's absurd."

"There is Mrs. Wentworth," said Keith. "You had better see she is all right."

Captain Wallace and Inspector Wilks both looked very taken aback at this suggestion that a new tragedy might have taken place, and they hurried together up the stairs. But Reenie an-

swered at once when they knocked, and when they told her her sister was there she came quickly to the door. In answer to their inquiries, she said she had seen and heard nothing, and they carried Esme up and laid her on the bed in Reenie's care, while a hurried search through the house made it certain that the stranger—Bert Wentworth or another—was no longer under that roof.

"All the doors and windows are locked still on the inside, and I'll take my oath he never passed me again," declared the constable obstinately, "it fair beats me, it does."

"There's the chimneys," suggested some one from behind.

"Don't be a fool," snapped Inspector Wilks irritably; "they're too narrow, and besides no one could climb them without making a lot of soot fall and there's none showing."

But Keith, who was standing at the top of the stairs, remembered how equally mysteriously his assailant he now identified with the man of the woods he had seen this night had vanished on the occasion of his first sojourn under that roof. It seemed to him certain that there must be some means of leaving the house they had not found. He had noticed already that the skylight was rather wide open, and dim thoughts were moving in his mind.

"Do you notice," he said to Wilks, "that the skylight is wide open?"

"Well, what about it?" snapped Wilks. "It doesn't lead anywhere except to the roof, does it? You don't suppose he is crawling about there, do you?"

"I don't know," answered Keith; "but suppose you and I go out and see what we can see while one of your men keeps an eye open inside here."

Wilks shrugged his shoulder.

"Oh, very well," he said; "but why in the name of common sense should any one go and roost on a roof? A man may try to escape by housetops in a town of course, but why on earth should any one want to prowl round the chimney pots of a detached house like this—and come of his own free will to do it?"

He was still grumbling as he followed Keith out of the house into the open, and as they came to the corner by the drawing-room window they saw distinctly and plainly a shapeless, shadowy form that ran like some unimaginably enormous cat or witch's familiar spirit up the side of the house almost as easily as though it ran on level ground.

Even as they stared, amazed and utterly bewildered by the sight, they saw it reach the gutter and lay hold of it and swing itself up and over and disappear from sight on to the roof.

"I . . . I . . . what . . . ?" stammered the Inspector. "If that don't beat all!"

Keith too was staring blankly upwards, trying vainly to conceive what it could be that they had seen and what it all meant. From the house Captain Wallace's voice called impatiently:

"Wilks, Wilks, where are you? What are you doing?"

"Watching the devil, I think, sir," answered Wilks; "we have just seen him run up the side of the house and now he's on the roof."

"What do you mean?" asked the Captain angrily; and even as he spoke there broke out above their heads a strange, wild tumult, a sound of running to and fro, of stamping and scrambling, of a displaced tile kicked loose and falling to the ground, and above all else a shrill, weird, inarticulate screaming like nothing they had ever heard before and that filled all the quiet night with its clamour.

Strange beyond all conception was this mad tumult that had broken out so suddenly for no imaginable reason upon the house's roof. There was one man began to mutter prayers and another crossed himself, but most stood still in blank bewilderment, as though almost supposing their senses had betrayed them and they were the victims of some magic or enchantment. Of them all Keith

was the first to recover himself, for some faint idea of the meaning of it began to come to him, and he ran into the house and up the stairs to where the policeman left to guard the skylight had shrunk away from it in terror.

"There's devils up there," he gasped as Keith came running up the stairs; "a leg came through, a great leg all over hair," and he pointed as he spoke to the open skylight.

"Help me up," said Keith briefly, and with a great leap he caught the edge of the skylight and swung there.

"Rather you nor me," muttered the constable, but took him round the legs and gave him an upward heave so that he was able to draw himself through to the roof, and as he crouched there with one knee on the slates and one still hanging down he saw two dark figures entwined, stamping, struggling, wrestling in fierce conflict to the accompaniment of a shrill, high screaming one of them uttered without ceasing.

It was only for a moment or two it lasted as he rested there, half in, half out of the skylight, and watched the two combatants, clearly outlined against the sky, as they fought, broke loose, closed again and wrestled together between the chimney pots on the steep roof side. How they kept their footing at all was a wonder, and he saw them fall

and recover themselves and resume their struggle as fiercely as before when at once there came the inevitable end. For again they fell, and this time did not recover their footing but, clasped in each other's arms, rolled together on the roof and over and over with increasing momentum down its steep slope; against its low brick parapet their impact shattered, and over the edge in the midst of a shower of bricks and a length of broken gutter to fall crashing to the ground beneath.

Keith drew back through the skylight and dropped down by the side of the pale constable.

"It's all over," he said.

He ran down the stairs and out of the house round to the side. A little group of men had already gathered there, and in the midst lay, still clasped in each other's arms, their hands at each other's throats, that man whom Keith had seen before and knew for Bert Wentworth and a naked hairy monstrous form that seemed only half human with its scowling bestial features and great protruding jaw on which the death foam was already gathering.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Explanation

"Are they dead?" Captain Wallace asked.

"This one's alive," answered Wilks, who was on his knees stooping over the two motionless forms. He put his hand over Bert Wentworth's heart and felt it beating still, and then he turned to the other. "This one is dead, I think," he said. "Is it a man?"

The question was not surprising, for the dark skin, the bestial features, the unnatural length of limb compared with the small, squat trunk, and the extreme hairiness of the whole body made up a total that in the uncertain and varying light of the lanterns seemed indeed more animal than human, and to suggest that if the creature were really man then he belonged to some new type or perhaps was rather a reversion to the forerunners of the human race of a thousand generations back.

"Beg pardon, sir," said one of the police, coming up, "there's this, sir."

"This" was a great flashing necklace of shining

diamonds that dangled from the man's outstretched hand, and Keith cried excitedly:

"The jewels, the lost jewels. You have found them at last?"

"They're all about," said the man; "they came down with them from the roof; they're mixed up everywhere with the bricks and the slates."

"Then that's what they were doing up there," cried Keith; "the jewellery must have been hidden on the roof when it was taken from where I put it in the rainwater tank. Bert Wentworth realized that his game was lost, and so he came here tonight to get the jewellery. He must have climbed out through the skylight on to the roof, and there he met this creature of his come with the same idea and they started fighting."

"Yes," agreed the Captain, "it looks as though that were it. Carry them into the house. I hope the doctor won't be long."

In a very few minutes the doctor appeared. Bert Wentworth he pronounced alive indeed, but not likely to survive many hours. His companion, the unknown creature of the woods, was already dead when the doctor looked at him, and indeed the injuries he had received were so terrible it was a wonder he had not been killed on the spot.

"What is he? Where does he come from?" the doctor asked. "I have never seen any one like

him; he is more like one of the anthropoid apes than an ordinary human being. Where does he come from?"

"From a tree top last," answered Captain Wallace, "and that is about all we know."

"Very remarkable," said the doctor; "look at the abnormal development of the great toe and indeed of all the muscles of the foot. He must have been able to climb like a cat."

"He could," agreed Keith. "We saw him run up the side of this house just by the aid of a gutter pipe almost as though he were walking on the level. He must have been in the habit of doing that and of getting admittance by the skylight. Who could have guessed that when all the doors and windows were fastened so securely some one was climbing up the side of the house and over the roof and in and out by the skylight just as he liked?"

The doctor went next to see Esme, and reported that she had passed into a sound sleep from which, he said, she was on no account to be wakened. He seemed to be very well satisfied with her condition and appeared to have some hope that this new shock she had suffered might have the effect of restoring her lost memory.

Keith, who was utterly exhausted, got the doctor to attend to some of the numerous cuts and scratches he had endured, and then lay down on a couch in

the drawing-room and dropped asleep almost at once. When he awoke it was late the next day, and Captain Wallace and Inspector Wilks were seated together by the window, smoking contentedly, with the air of men who had satisfactorily completed a good job of work.

"Ah, you are awake, Mr. Norton," said Captain Wallace, seeing him looking at them. "How do you feel?"

"A bit stiff," answered Keith. "Have I been asleep long? What time is it? How is Miss Esme?"

"The doctor thinks she is getting on very well indeed," answered the Captain with a slight smile. "Her memory has come back; the doctor said he hoped it would. He says she must be kept very quiet for the present, but he let me have a little chat with her this morning, and I had a talk with Mrs. Wentworth, too. Bert Wentworth will not live many hours, but he has made a full confession, and I think I may say that everything is quite clear now. It seems Bert Wentworth has been at the bottom of the whole thing."

"I was sure of that," said Keith; "and that creature of his, that wild man or whatever he was?"

"Bert Wentworth brought him with him from South Africa," answered the Captain. "It is a curious story, but I see no reason to doubt it.

Wentworth says his name was Joe—he had no other—and that he was of mixed European and negro birth, and that when he was a baby, only a few months old, he was stolen by baboons and brought up by them 'till he was twelve years of age. One hears stories of that sort of thing happening in India where sometimes native children wander into the jungle and live and grow up there with the beasts, but I never before heard of such a case in South Africa. According to Wentworth's story Joe became just like one of the baboons and lived with them as one of them till he was wounded and captured by natives during a raid the baboons made on some mealiefields. His story attracted some interest, and a missionary undertook his education, but he remained undeveloped mentally and very malicious and mischievous. He seemed as though he could not get rid of the traits brought out in him by his life among the baboons, though in time he learned to wear clothing, to behave with some regard for ordinary ways and customs, and to talk well enough, though he was always apt to fall back on an incoherent animal chattering when excited. Finally, he either ran away from the missionary or was sent off on account of some especially malicious trick, and came in contact with Wentworth, who seems to have realized that such a creature might be useful under certain circum-

stances. At the time Wentworth was in funds and he was thinking of returning to England to make an attempt to reinstate himself with his step-father, old Mr. Wentworth, and get hold of some or all of his money. He brought Joe back with him, and setting himself to watch his step-father and Dick Wentworth who had taken his place as heir, soon discovered that Dick was secretly married and that there was a chance for him to act. His first step was to inform old Mr. Wentworth anonymously of the secret marriage, in the hope that the old man would at once destroy the will making Dick his heir. Though he does not say so, I think there is no doubt his plans also included murdering his step-father before he could make a fresh will, in which case Bert would have been able to claim the greater portion of the estate under the marriage settlements. Or, if Dick could be effectually disposed of, either by a second murder or by fastening on him the guilt of his uncle's death, Bert would have taken it all. The plan was quite a good one, and I think might very well have succeeded but for your unexpected, unprepared for, and somewhat unauthorized interference, Mr. Norton. Bert Wentworth seems to have begun operations by sending his telegram to his step-father to inform him that Dick was married and was staying here. As it happened, Dick got to know the contents of this

telegram, rushed over in panic-stricken haste and whirled his wife away, leaving everything just as it was and leaving even the store of jewellery he had collected as a nest-egg for emergencies. But old Mr. Wentworth met with a slight accident as he was hurrying here and never arrived at all, and Bert Wentworth was very much worried by your appearance on the scene. He had not wished to show himself, but he had left his creature, Joe, in the wood with orders to watch carefully and report everything that happened. On hearing of your arrival he came to see you and failed to make out who you were or what you wanted. At that time he knew nothing about the hidden jewellery, but Joe, some time in his climbing and watching, had got to know of its existence, and though I don't suppose he realized what it was or understood its value, he was attracted by the shining of the jewels and was planning in his own way to get possession of it without saying anything to Bert Wentworth. It was for that reason he came prowling about the house in the way he did, and that was why he made his first attack on you. He thought you were hunting for the jewellery, too. Then Miss Esme appeared in search of her sister who had vanished from her home without giving any explanation. She took you for Dick Wentworth, and it seems that on her first visit when she

went upstairs, in the belief that her sister was hidden there by you, she had a glimpse of Joe peeping at her through the bedroom window. He had a way of lowering himself from the gutter to the window sills beneath and either peeping through the glass or else letting himself in that way to resume his search for the jewellery. Perhaps he was peeping through like that when he got his first glimpse of it. Anyhow, his face at the window gave Miss Esme a great fright, but some further information came to her to make her certain her sister was here, and so she returned and was attacked in the wood by Joe and rescued by you. I gather it was because her memory was gone and she did not know what to do that she stayed on here and Joe was still lurking in the wood, watching you both. He found out somehow, perhaps he watched you hiding it, where you had put the jewellery, and he removed it and hid it on the roof of the house near one of the chimney pots. I suppose he thought it quite safe there, and indeed I don't suppose any one would ever have looked for it on the housetop. Everything else you know, I think. Bert Wentworth, as soon as Joe informed him of his cousin's return, let old Mr. Wentworth know and tried to dispose of you but failed. He says you were getting on his nerves; at times he suspected you of being a plain clothes detective.

Watching from the wood he saw old Mr. Wentworth destroy his will, an action that was the poor old gentleman's death warrant, for on his way back through the wood to his car he was attacked by Bert Wentworth and Joe and murdered. They did not attempt to hide the body, as they hoped suspicion would fall on Dick, one of whose handkerchiefs they had used for committing the crime. But Dick rather spoiled that part of the plan by coming to search the wood for his uncle, and chancing to stumble across them. On seeing them he guessed at once what they had done—and shared his uncle's fate. It was necessary to dispose of him, Bert Wentworth told me, for their own safety. Old Mr. Wentworth's chauffeur, by the way, did not report what had happened, or say anything about his master being missing, as the opportunity struck him as a favourable one for disposing of the car and decamping with the money. We have traced the car, but we have not got him yet, though I hope we shall soon. I think there's no doubt that by this time Bert Wentworth was beginning to see that things weren't happening quite as he liked, and apparently he decided to retire from the scene for a while and perhaps try to establish a claim to his step-father's estate later on. But, unluckily for himself, he decided to take with him the jewellery he had somehow got to know had been hidden

by Joe on the housetop, and he was in the very act of pocketing it when Joe himself appeared, most likely on the same errand, for I expect even he had realized that File's Wood was getting too hot to hold him any longer. Mrs. Wentworth's sister, Miss Esme, by the way, had heard that things were happening here. The boy you sent for us, Mr. Norton, had let his tongue wag pretty freely, and Miss Esme got the idea that you were in danger and started off to see what she could do to help. She was on the way through the wood here when Joe saw her and attacked her. The failure of that attempt of his made him feel he had better clear off in a hurry, but no doubt he felt he wanted to take with him the pretty toys he had secreted on the house roof. When he got there, infuriated at finding Bert Wentworth beforehand with the jewellery, he flew at him with the result you know. And on the whole," concluded Captain Wallace thoughtfully, "I suppose Bert Wentworth's death has robbed the gallows of as pretty a scoundrel as ever swung at a rope's end."

There was still much to be done, much to be seen to and arranged, and later on inquests had to be held on the four men whose deaths had followed one another in such swift and tragic succession. Fortunately the sequence of events was quite plain by now, and the fact that there was no longer any

mystery about the affair or any doubt as to the identity or motives of the criminals, prevented any very great public interest being aroused. One or two paragraphs relating to the "wild man," "the man of the woods," "the human baboon," as the papers called him according to fancy, were indeed published, but did not attract much attention, being set down as due to the unpruned imagination of some junior reporter. Reenie and Esme were therefore spared a notoriety and public excitement that would have added much to what they had been called upon to go through, and even their ordeal in the witness box before the coroner was made as easy for them as possible.

By the duplicate will old Mr. Wentworth had not destroyed Dick Wentworth had been made his chief heir, inheriting about two-thirds of his fortune of which the rest went to certain charities. There was no opposition to probate being granted to Reenie as heir to her husband, and one day very soon there came to Keith a little note signed by her, asking him to help her by undertaking the charge of her financial interests, since she was now principal proprietor of a large and flourishing business.

Keith had been dismally wondering what was to become of him and whether he would ever again hear of Esme, who was still weak and ill and whom

he had hardly seen, and never seen alone, since that last eventful tragic night. The note asked him to call on Reenie at a certain address, but when he got there it was Esme who received him alone in the drawing-room.

She told him Reenie would come soon, and then a sudden shyness seemed to fall between them, and she sat looking at the toe of her small slipper and he sat opposite and dared not speak a word. It was she who broke the silence first.

"I want to thank you," she began tremulously, "for . . . for . . ."

"Please don't," he interrupted. "I did nothing. You owe me nothing."

"I don't think it's very nice of you," she pouted, "to call my life nothing."

"But——" he began.

"Well, I do owe it you," she interrupted, looking at him suddenly, "don't I?"

He did not answer. He had gone very pale, for it seemed to him he had read something very plainly in her eyes.

"Esme, Esme," he muttered, "you are rich now."

"Haven't a single, solitary penny in the world," she declared with relish. "Thank goodness," she added meditatively.

"But your sister . . ."

"My sister's not me," said Esme. "I'm living with her just now, but she could turn me into the street any minute. Perhaps she will, too," she added, and she looked up at him very pathetically to see what he thought of that.

"She wouldn't do that," he said.

"She might," Esme insisted. "What I mean is, I'm not safe," and again she looked up at him, and then went on rather quickly: "You see we have no men folk in our family and no one to help us, and so Reenie thought perhaps you could help her to run the business and be her manager, so to say, and look after things. She would give you £800 a year."

He could not speak for a moment; he felt as though he were suffocating.

"Would that be enough," asked Esme innocently, "to support a—wife?"

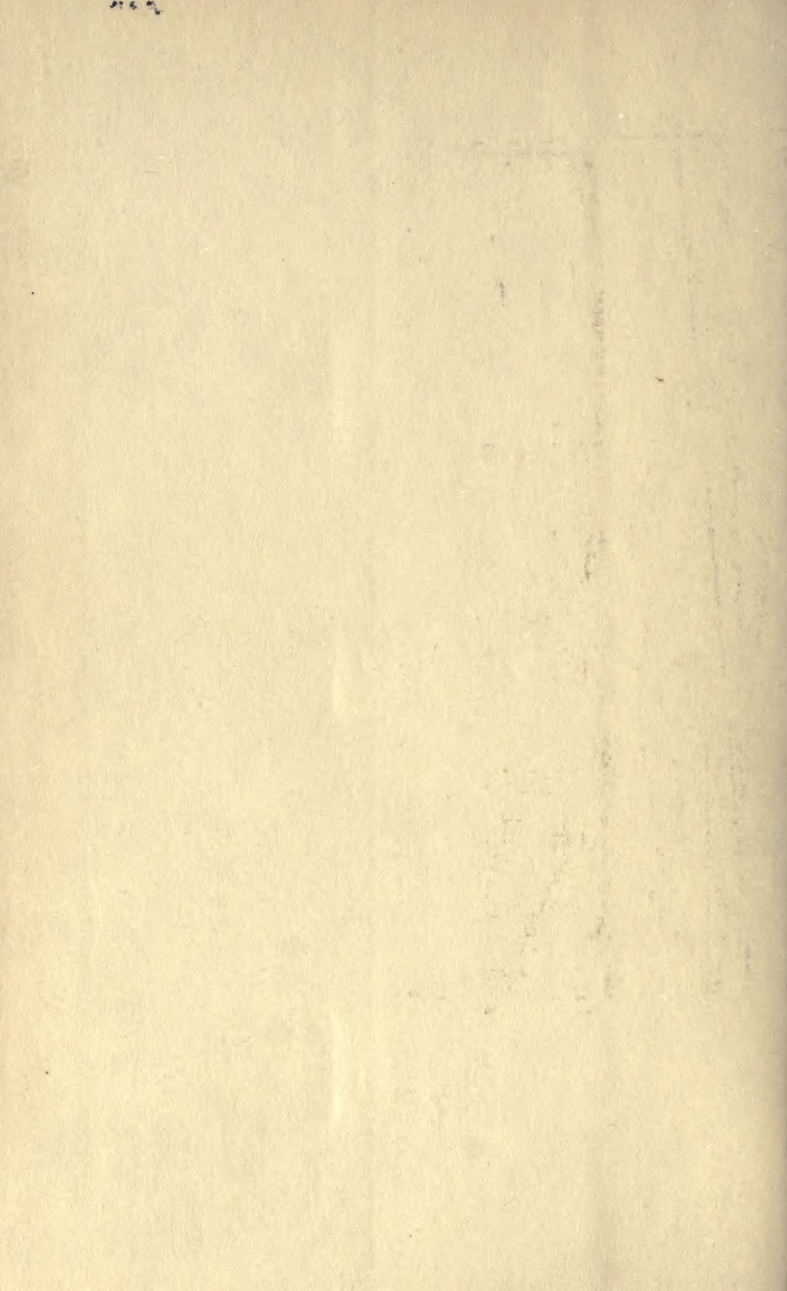
Still he did not speak, but he made a sudden movement forward, and on a sudden she was in his arms. It was after an appreciable interval that she remarked thoughtfully:

"But it took some pretty plain speaking on my part—now the last man who proposed to me . . ."

But he stopped that reminiscence with a kiss upon her lips.

THE END





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